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NOT QUITE WHITE

**Jewish Literary Identity, New Immigration
and Otherness in America, 1890-1930**

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PhD in English Literature

The University of Edinburgh

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis; that the following thesis is entirely my own work; and that no part of this thesis has been submitted for another degree or qualification.

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ABSTRACT

America's 'long early twentieth century' (1890-1945) was a period of intense industrialization, urbanization, and immigration which fundamentally altered the character of the nation. Between 1900 and 1924, which saw the curtailing of immigration from southern and eastern Europe via the passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act (successor to 1921's stop-gap Emergency Quota Act), more than 14 million people flocked to the U.S. in search of economic opportunity, social equality, and freedom from religious and political oppression. Descendants of these 'new immigrants,' as they were called, were by the late twentieth century a staple of white American suburbia, but their progenitors were variously considered 'off-white,' 'dark-white,' or non-white, with attendant connotations of mental, physical, and moral inferiority. This research examines texts, authored by Jewish immigrants such as Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Rose Cohen, and Mary Antin, which were published between 1890 and 1930, when the onset of the Great Depression saw a rise in anti-Semitism that contributed to the decline in popularity of 'up by the bootstraps' Americana whose narratives chronicled, ostensibly, social assimilation and cultural integration; it considers the ramifications of writing in English for a native audience, which frequently alienated Jewish immigrants from their peers, and analyzes the manner in which the United States' shifting social mores coincided with—and facilitated—new immigrants' reappraisal of religion, education, commerce, and family life in the 'new world' of the west. It argues that the ambivalence contained within many of these texts was both a reaction to nativist prejudices and an effort to expose misconceptions present on both sides of the wildly popular Americanization movement, as well as exploring the way that such narratives attempted the redefinition of American philanthropic, educational and civic paradigms—the preponderance of which passionately espoused rhetoric of equality while reinforcing the stratification of the United States' class system—into modes of interaction that accommodated difference while seeking to establish common ground upon which could be built a more inclusive, multiethnic future. Finally, it addresses the continuing relevance of these works as texts which both predict and presage modern modes of social interaction and discusses their future in an evolving literary canon that has, historically speaking, been an agent of western patriarchal hegemony.

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

All titles, quotations, and citations in this thesis are in MLA (Modern Language Association) style.

INTRODUCTION

Not Quite White: The Liminality of New Immigration

At the time, the story was ubiquitous: a downtrodden immigrant, driven from his homeland by poverty and oppression, arrives on the shores of the ‘new world’ in search of freedom and economic opportunity; he finds a job, works diligently, and eventually goes into business for himself; he changes his style of dress, learns English, and leaves his ‘old world’ habits behind, adopting western mannerisms, customs, and hobbies in the process; he integrates socially, amasses wealth, and rises in status to become the archetypal middle-class everyman. In short, he becomes an American. His transition, according to tradition, is facilitated by his adaptability, work ethic, and temperance, and it takes full advantage of his new country’s egalitarian nature. The immigrant has come to the United States, immersed himself in the ‘melting pot,’ and dissolved into the very fabric of America. But how much of this tale can we really believe? To a modern audience, it reeks of nativist propaganda. Surely the protagonist arrives in New York or Boston or Chicago in the late-nineteenth century and is assisted by his fellow immigrants, forging strong communal bonds based on shared heritage and, if not remaining in his comfortingly familiar ethnic enclave, negotiating neighborhood borders in a manner which builds up a solid, socially fluent, dual-culture persona, thus laying the groundwork for his modern successors’ cosmopolitan acumen. And yet, this latter account of the immigrant’s acculturative

journey goes too far in the other direction by applying, retrospectively, modern notions of group identity to a contemporary milieu which was unaccustomed to valuing heterogeneity

Elizabeth Ewen writes that “most American myths,” such as “the frontier, the Protestant success story, or the melting pot,” “focus on the heroic male who struggles against adversity, nature, poverty, or the mores of a strange country to triumphantly conquer the obstacles in his way” (14), thereby becoming, effectively, the master of his own destiny. “In the melting pot version of the myth,” she observes,

this male subject sheds his past, loses touch with his family, and adopts American values as part of his new identity: the immigrant male becomes “Americanized” when he accepts the ideology of progress. He is no longer bound by past loyalties but instead defines himself as an “individual,” free to choose his future. (14)

“The reward of Americanization,” she claims, “is upward mobility,” “and if he cannot Americanize, he will remain within the army of cheap labor, demoralized and dominated by his past. Recently,” however, “some social historians have rejected this myth and begun to chart a different trajectory. They argue,” Ewen reports,

that rather than . . . adapt[ing] or becom[ing] demoralized, these immigrants maintained many of their own traditions and institutions and used them as tools in their struggle for a decent life. They see immigrant family patterns, kinship networks, and local organizations as important aids in the fight for upward mobility. Old-world relationships flowered in the new world. Ethnic solidarity has been an important component of success.¹ (14)

The problem with this view is that “the immigrant emerges unscathed by his encounter with American life, unimpeded in his move upward by either the American

¹ For more on “the standard interpretation,” Ewen recommends Marcus Hansen’s *The Immigrant in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1951), and Humbert Nelli’s *Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); “for the new approach,” she recommends Virginia Yans-McLaughlin’s *Family and Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), Josef Barton’s *Peasants and Strangers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), and Thomas Kessner’s *The Golden Door* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) (Ewen 271).

economy or urban culture. He triumphs because of the plasticity of his past and his ethnicity.”² Clearly, this was not often the case.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., an ardent assimilationist and critic of multiculturalism (because, as Desmond King notes, “multiculturalism is a fundamental rejection of the melting-pot ethos”; 268), claims that the United States solved the “inherent fragility of a multiethnic society” by creating “a brand-new national identity, carried forward by individuals who, in forsaking old loyalties and joining to make new lives, melted away ethnic differences” (Schlesinger 13). King, however, avers that “this historical account is the stuff of conventional school textbooks” (270), which seems like a reasonable conclusion. King’s assessment of Peter Salins’ work, in which “the criticisms articulated by Schlesinger against multiculturalism find considerable resonance” (King 273), is also salient as when Salins defends “traditional assimilation” (273) by claiming that multiculturalism “promotes an agenda of ethnic grievances” (Salins 77) which results in “the trashing of America” and “robs our children of their most precious birthright: a justifiable pride in the American Idea and the generally enlightened and idealistic trajectory of America’s domestic and foreign policies” (81-82), King maintains that “this view shows too little appreciation of how that very ‘American Idea’ has been politically manipulated and just how exclusionary it has [historically] been” (273). Although multiculturalism is a modern concept, it echoes, to a degree, the cultural pluralism of several early-twentieth century liberal reformers, including John Dewey and Horace Kallen, the latter of whom is credited with coining the term, and it is King’s “politically manipulated” and “exclusionary” aspects of Salins’ “American Idea” that I intend to address with this research.

² Ewen also emphasizes that “with significant exceptions, he is a *he*” as “the new history continues to take a male subject for granted” (14). “For a more feminist approach,” she directs the reader to the work of Miriam Cohen and Judith Smith and recommends Louise Tilley and Joan Scott’s *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1978) (271).

Contemporary immigrants who completely acculturated seem to have been few and far between, and King is right to question Schlesinger's claim about America's "brilliant solution" (13): "if it was so successful," he asks, "then would multiculturalism, ethnic division, and racial hostilities have formed as intensely and deeply as they have?" (King 270). However, the obverse of Schlesinger's view—that an immigrant "emerges unscathed" from the melting pot (Ewen 14)—is also unrealistic in its assumption of absolutism.

In this study, I attempt to illustrate how much unacknowledged middle ground was extant during America's New Immigration period, and how multi-faceted the problems facing those attempting acculturation really were. In so doing, I focus on Jewish writers for several reasons. First and foremost, due to concurrent circumstances in the Russian Empire (and their continuing effect on Jewish settlements after the Russian Revolution of 1917), Jewish immigrants comprised a significant percentage of new arrivals during the United States' most intense period of open immigration, which lasted from roughly the middle of the 1870s to 1924,³ and, because of what Phillip Barrish calls "the value that Jewish culture has always accorded to intellect and learning" (77) (nearly all boys attended *cheder*, a form of religious primary school, in Russia), their literacy rate was disproportionately high.⁴ Secondly, in choosing to examine texts written by Jewish authors, one narrows the field of study to a particular geographical location—namely, New York City's Lower East Side, the majority of immigrants' first port of call in America, and where many

³ Between 1890 and 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Act (Pub.L. 68-139, 43 Stat. 153) drastically curtailed immigration, roughly 23 million people immigrated to the U.S. from southern and eastern Europe (Ewen 21), including "more than 2 million Jews" fleeing the "economic deterioration, educational and professional isolation, and physical harassment" of Russia's Pale of Settlement (Rockaway 5)

⁴ Immigration statistics reveal that the average literacy rate for "Hebrew immigrants" between 1899 and 1910 was 74%, with the highest yearly percentage being 80%, in 1899, and the lowest being 70%, in 1908 (Perlmann 18). After 1907 there is information on literacy rates for males and females, with the data showing that from 1908 to 1910 the female literacy was roughly 18% lower than male literacy, likely due to male education in *cheders*.

Jews chose to settle after arriving in the U.S. via the country's busiest immigration checkpoints—and can therefore examine the economic, social, religious, and educational conditions in a specific area which Abraham Cahan famously called “the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world” (*Yekl* 13) due to its reputation as a cramped, bustling, and populous haven for persecuted individuals fleeing ‘The Pale of Jewish Settlement.’ Finally, in choosing to focus on Jewish writers, some specific examples of the middle ground omitted from both versions of the melting pot acculturation myth can be found in Cahan and Anzia Yezierska, whose narratives emphasize the duality and dangers of Americanization in complex and enduring ways. Cahan, a journalist as well as an essayist and novelist, was originally a firm proponent of assimilation, “often [giving] encouragement to accommodating American life and manners” in his newspaper columns (Lipsky *xvi*), yet his stories do not offer the promise of complete acculturation and acceptance. Yezierska, as a woman, embodies another glaring omission from the myth: the female immigrant who cannot acculturate due to societal constraints in both her old and new cultures. Amy Koritz maintains that “in her uneasy and finally unsuccessful attempts to find a community that did not ask her to give up either her aspirations or her history, Yezierska fell between the cracks in American identity” (134), yet her conflicted identity is as much a part of the ‘melting pot’ as any other.

Yezierska and Cahan, as well as autobiographers such as Rose Cohen and Mary Antin (both of whom are included in this study), can simultaneously be affiliated with two groups of people, and their characters—for, as we will see, even autobiographical texts may contain semifictional protagonists—are completely at home with neither. Echoing Ewen's summation of the archetypal melting pot immigrant as one who “is no longer bound by past loyalties but instead defines

himself as an ‘individual’” (14), these writers’ creations seek to determine their own futures, yet their location on the outskirts of the dominant ‘Anglo-Saxon’ culture engenders a liminal status that precludes, rather than enables, the freedom which would ultimately allow them to make such choices. Frequently promised, but never really attaining full acceptance, their protagonists cannot define themselves as individuals in the conventional melting pot vein as America at large seems to insist upon recognizing them by the very group definitions and old world loyalties that they seek to shed, making true individualist assimilation impossible in the face of what Juan F. Perea would call a “hostile majority” (62). The inability, or unwillingness, of the dominant culture to embrace those whom they see as outsiders frequently forces a return to and strengthening of “past loyalties” (Ewen 14) rather than encouraging further attempts at assimilation, which phenomenon Richard Alba describes as having consequences for identity in the United States up to the present day when he writes that “the persistence of ethnic identities can . . . be understood as an outcome of assimilation in a societal context that remains fundamentally multiethnic and multiracial, and where, therefore, competition between groups defined in ethnic terms remains a powerful force” (293-294).

The precedent for such a claim was established in the 1920s, when decades of debate over various aspects of immigration, naturalization and assimilation culminated in a series of quota laws reinforcing the concept of Americanism as being fundamentally synonymous with Anglo-Saxonism, and which would today be seen as blatantly discriminatory, if not overtly racist in their collusion with contemporary eugenic arguments about the so-called racial traits and desirability of certain ethnic groups. King claims that “the immigration policy choices of [the 1920s] introduced distinctions into the U.S. polity that necessarily weakened the assimilationist ideal,

devaluing southeastern European immigrants to the benefit of Europeans descended from northwestern countries” (269), and this devaluing both reinforced the contemporary opinion that not all groups were assimilable and fostered communities amidst ethnic enclaves that had, years earlier, formed in response to such opinions. Concurring with Alba’s view, King writes that the modern consequence of this decade’s legislative preoccupation with ‘assimilable’ aliens “is an ambivalence (among groups outside the Anglo-American group) about both assimilation and Americanization” (269). This phenomenon, strong enough to generate an ambivalent response which continues to affect the country’s sociopolitical discourse nearly a century later, has obvious literary ramifications as well, especially amongst authors whose works hinge on depictions of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigrant life. Thus it is unsurprising that, “drawn to the hope of absolute assimilation, of being judged solely as an individual, never as a Jew or immigrant, but unable to fit into the world she aspired to enter, Yeziarska’s fiction depicts characters buffeted between autonomy and belonging” (Koritz 134). The narratives themselves simultaneously represent, in fictional form, the desire to acculturate, the Anglo-assimilationist rebuff, and the ongoing battle between the need to belong and the quest for individual identity. Cahan’s protagonists, despite their creator’s frequently pro-assimilationist journalistic stance, fare little better, and these fictional characters echo the concerns of their creators while channeling the public debates over immigration which were raging at the time of their creation: they are the literary embodiment of a group who were not ‘white’ enough to thoroughly incorporate into the mainstream, yet were not dark enough to be completely excluded from it. As such, they speak of a third, largely unacknowledged group of individuals hitherto left out of the melting pot mythos by its more ardent devotees on both sides of the argument. Indeed, their very

existence, and the existence of the narratives in which they reside, leaves the idea of “the assimilationist model as a template for all Americans” looking “distinctly tarnished” (King 268-269). These authors’ texts are the essence of the middle ground that neither side of the myth acknowledges, and are therefore integral to our understanding of the reality of the situation. Without these writers, either side can claim to be right, but *with* them such a claim is difficult to make.

David Roediger, in *Working Toward Whiteness*, explains the plight of southern and eastern European immigrants during this era as being twofold. Italian, Greek, Russian, Polish, and Jewish immigrants “embodied the ‘dark white’ (and possibly not white) immigration ‘problem’ that a century ago was thought to threaten the racial foundations of the nation” (4), and in the America of “the ‘long early twentieth century,’” or “‘the period from 1890 to 1945’” (9), there were no hyphenated definitions of racial or cultural identity. Ethnicity, which looks at language, religion, nationality and culture in addition to skin color and genetic heritage, was not yet an idea entertained in public debates on the subject, and, because of this, conversations about race and culture became muddled as confused individuals, in the absence of concepts and language which differentiated the two, “engaged in ethnic prejudice, as opposed to . . . race prejudice” (11). Furthermore, unlike ‘white,’ ‘old stock’ immigrants of English, German, French, and Dutch origin, Jews would have been called “‘new immigrants’ and doubly damned by the term. On one hand,” Roediger reports,

it would have connoted an inexperienced recent arrival, a greenhorn. But new immigrants were also new because they represented a different source of migrants—the streams from southern and eastern Europe that overtook the streams from northern and western Europe . . . and furnished the great majority of the more than 14 million newcomers coming in the first two decades of the twentieth century. (4)

The appellation of “new immigrant,” “a racially inflected term that categorized the numerous newcomers from southern and eastern Europe as different from both the whiter and longer established northern and western European migrants to the United States and from the nonwhite Chinese and other ‘Asiatics’” (5-6), put these recent arrivals in a category by themselves. New immigrants were not “white” as earlier immigrants were white, but they were not “black” or “yellow” either; they lived in a world of “‘Dagoes and Hunkies’” (10), derogatory “dark-white” nicknames, wherein they were segregated as much for economic and class prejudice as for issues of race. The strange space occupied by new immigrants as neither white nor conclusively non-white, and as supposedly inferior, in terms of morality, intelligence, social class and economic status, to earlier European migrants, became a kind of limbo from which there was no immediate or effective escape. “‘Inbetweeness,’” Roediger writes, “‘carries a useful expectation of possible change over time, much as ‘new immigrant’ did” (13), which was meant to encourage the recent arrivals to Americanize as rapidly and as thoroughly as possible.

In this state of fundamental liminality, every decision, every action has the potential to become a semiotic sign. Every choice has the potential to communicate something about one’s identity, which constantly hangs in the balance. “Like nationalism,” Jacobson asserts, “ethnic identity is neither fixed nor constant” (*Sorrows* 17), and, in the present, it “is usually a matter of personal choice” (Franklin 5).⁵ Indeed, according to Rogers Brubaker, “ethnicity, race, and nationhood exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, categorizations, and identifications. They are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world”

⁵ Franklin notes that “membership in an ethnic group is [usually] considered involuntary because one is born into it,” but explains that “when an individual who is perceived as belonging to a particular ethnic group chooses to incorporate that social distinction into his or her subjective definition of self, that becomes the individual’s ‘ethnic identity’” (5), resulting in “‘doing being ethnic’” (Brubaker 476).

(481), hence their ability to be altered. Immigrant authors like Cahan and Yezierska, frustrated with their circumstances, attempted to change them by making conscious—and constant—assertions of identity. One of the most obvious of these assertions, on the part of both writers, is the decision to write in English for a native audience. Such a decision is fraught with peril; on the one hand, it inevitably distances an immigrant or ethnic writer from their peers, but on the other, it is, potentially, an opportunity to barter for more freedom and cultural capital. Thomas Ferraro maintains that

turn[ing] to ethnic narrative is an attempt . . . to negotiate the terms in which the greater freedoms of the United States are to be accepted: on the one hand to dispel the charge by the clan of having undergone an essential and traitorous assimilation; on the other, to dispel the charge by the culture at large of possessing predispositions of mind and heart inappropriate if not antithetical to the developing concerns of a national literature and culture.
(10)

Hence authoring “ethnic narrative[s]” in English would seem to be, in Ferraro’s opinion, a supreme manifestation of liminality. This is not an unreasonable conclusion, especially when considered alongside Judith Oster, who contends that “language is never just a means of representing or conveying information, never just an instrument of communication, but, as François G. Grosjean points out in *Life with Two Languages*, a symbol of social or group identity, an emblem of group membership and solidarity” (59) “at once a social *institution*, like the laws, the religion or the economy of the community, and a social *instrument* which accompanies and makes possible all other institutions” (Haugen 87). “As an institution it may become *a symbol of the community group*” (87), “but the question becomes: *which* group, *which* community, and what does the choice symbolize? Further[more], is a choice to develop greater solidarity with the ‘new’ group seen as defection or disloyalty toward the ‘home’ group, or is it valued and encouraged?” (Oster 59). History has revealed that the answer to the latter question is dependent

upon which group is answering it. We can say with certainty, however, that “since one’s language is so bound up with one’s identity, and culture so connected to language, language facility and language choice loom large in bicultural identity”⁶ (Oster 60).

Oster’s comments, while supporting Ferraro’s assertion that writing in English is a decidedly liminal act, add the potential for change. With the English version of *Yekl*,⁷ for example, “Cahan place[s] himself in [the] role of interpreter, crossing the linguistic border” between Yiddish and English “in order to depict an aspect of the immigrant community to the American population whose language and identity it [is] struggling to adopt” (Taubenfeld 144). “Cahan, a Russian Jewish immigrant living on the Lower East Side, sought to establish himself as an American author by using a story from his ethnic community as his literary vehicle” (144), but he was also endeavoring to alter the character of his community’s interactions with the dominant American culture. While being careful to avoid falling into the age-old trap wherein we assume Cahan is an ‘ambassador’ for ethnic culture, it is important to note that a critical feature of his work—and Yezierska’s—is its exploration of alternative paths to belonging. Explorations of these alternative paths, and their historical context, comprise the bedrock of each of this thesis’ four chapters. Chapter One examines the effects of immigration on religion by discussing traditional Jewish orthodoxy’s gender roles and family structures; it evaluates the female struggle against old world

⁶ Oster emphasizes “how much of a person—personality, depth, intelligence—is lost in the poverty of an as yet unfamiliar language” (107), as well as reiterating that “cross-cultural conflicts—and cross-generational conflicts, which,” as we will see in Chapter One, “are surely cultural—come encased in, carried by, [and] associated with languages, especially where the cultures are represented by speakers of different languages” (60).

⁷ As Taubenfeld reports in “‘Only an “L”’: Linguistic Borders and the Immigrant Author in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl* and *Yankel der Yankee*,” Cahan wrote *Yekl* in English but was unable to secure a publisher, so he rewrote it in Yiddish and the second version of the text was the first to be published. Cahan did not simply translate the original draft, however; he reworked it to accommodate the cultural differences between his audiences, renamed the main character and retitled the work *Yankel der Yankee*. As Taubenfeld ably demonstrates, the writer’s genius for multilingual wordplay imbues a comparison of the two texts with more than a little complexity.

patriarchy, the adaptation of male religious comportment in the new world, and considers efforts to reconcile traditional piety with western circumstances. Chapter Two focuses on charity; it discusses old world ideas of communal support and contrasts them with organized American charity, paying particular attention to the effects of Progressive Era ideologies on the changing relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, and evaluates textual critiques of institutional Americanization. Chapter Three explores the immigrant obsession with education, looks at manifestations of educational mania which mimic religious devotion, evaluates linguistic hegemony, and discusses the relationship between the imperfection of memory, the lure of the 'golden past,' and the fundamentally divisive character of American ethnicity. Chapter Four examines industrialized consumerism, explores the sexual and semiotic power of the immigrant wardrobe, discusses alternative paths to citizenship, and engages in a critique of the redefinition of democracy. Finally, the conclusion addresses the rather thorny issue of ethnic canonicity. Are two canons better than one? Should ethnic literature be integrated into the mainstream canon? Can a text survive the transition from the ethnic to the mainstream canon, or, as Ostendorf is wont to claim, does "its victory as literature [spell] its defeat as ethnic culture" (150)? At present, there are no answers to these questions, but taking the time to ask them is a step in the right direction.

CHAPTER ONE

“God [Doesn’t] Listen to Women”: New Immigrants and “Domestic Religion” in the United States⁸

For new immigrants living in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, choosing to write in English was both an emotionally charged and a consummately political decision. On the one hand, doing so made an author’s work accessible to an American audience largely unfamiliar with and illiterate in Russian, Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew; on the other hand, it was apt to distance a writer from their fellow immigrants, many of whom viewed such linguistic assimilation as a betrayal of group identity (“inevitably,” writes Vivian Gornick, “people between worlds alienate those who occupy the territory in which they themselves have only one foot”; *ix*), as well as opening their work up to the, at best, erroneous and, at worst, mendacious label of “insider’s guide” (Ferraro 53) which allowed it to be pigeonholed and dismissed by the literary establishment. The view of ethnic fiction as being representative of “how the other half lives” (Phelps 21) persists, in large part, to this day, especially when discussing texts written during the New Immigration period, and, as such, novels by writers like Anzia Yezierska, lauded in her era as “the recognized mouthpiece of New York’s Jewish East Side” (E. Brown 270), and Abraham Cahan, who “seems to have [been] forever stamped . . . a cultural ambassador . . . who served up the Jewish ghetto and made it accessible for an audience far broader than the

⁸ Yezierska *Bread Givers* 9; Myerhoff *Number Our Days* 256

Yiddish-speaking readership of the Lower East Side” (Jacobson ““Quintessence”” 103), are frequently perceived as being valuable for documenting social history rather than for their import as complex works of literature. Thankfully, however, recent criticism has been revising this stance and casting new light on many of the period’s more neglected and misrepresented texts, including Yeziarska’s, with the result that acknowledging the ambivalence and irony contained therein is becoming crucial to their interpretation.

One of the defining characteristics of Yeziarska’s fiction, which—with the exception of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), a volume touted as an autobiography despite portraying a “factitious” version of the author’s life (Gelfant ix)⁹—was published between 1920 and 1932, is an intense desire for the freedom supposedly gained by transcending the physical, emotional and sexual boundaries of the traditional Jewish life perpetuated, to an extent, in New York City’s Lower East Side ghetto. One of the primary dialectical devices embodying—and complicating—this literary escapism is the introduction of men who initially appear to be kind, educated and benevolent envoys of American culture sent, perhaps by divine forces, to guide the protagonists toward the liberating new world milieu synonymous with the glamorous, if nebulously defined region of ‘uptown.’ The miraculous appearance of these men, who seem to materialize out of nowhere, in the obstreperous environment of the Lower East Side is a boon to Yeziarska’s heroines before the individuals become frustrating symbols of abortive acculturation and unattainable acceptance by the country’s cultural elite, but in the interim they epitomize the overwhelming, obsessive urge to “make [oneself] for a person” (Yeziarska *Bread Givers* 21) by

⁹ Riva Krut, writing during the resurgence of interest in the author’s work which occurred in the 1980s, refers to the text as Yeziarska’s “fictionalized autobiography” (xii, xx), as does Alice Kessler-Harris (Introduction xvii), and Gay Wilentz describes it as “semifictional” (x) while Louise Levitas Henriksen, the writer’s daughter, claims that it is “thoroughly interlarded with invented characters and scenes” and was “mistakenly labeled an autobiography” by its publisher (Afterword 255).

socializing with native-born citizens beyond the confines of neighborhoods defined by their inhabitants' old world heritage. Consequently, one of the reasons Yeziarska's characters are so starved for social interaction outside of the ghetto and laud teachers and native-born Americans as representative of the level of society to which they aspire is that, as we will see in this chapter, historically speaking, Jewish women did not have much of a place outside of the home. American men, and those of learning in particular, represented for these women the possibility of a modern lifestyle – one in which there would be less pressure to remain at home in the traditional manner. In the introduction to her study of gender politics in early-twentieth century America, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1892-1925*, Elizabeth Ewen gives a description of the plight of Jewish and Italian immigrant women that, while discussing their economic and social progress outside of the home in America, is also apt in describing the prevailing religious and cultural attitudes that kept them *in* the home. “These women,” she claims, “grew up in patriarchal European societies that narrowly defined the boundaries of female possibility, where family and community organized and maintained a customary culture” (15-16), where “instead of receiving a formal education, they were trained in sewing, spinning, [and] cooking,” and wherein “by the age of ten they were expected to be proficient in the performance of household duties, including the care of younger children” (32). However, coinciding with Yeziarska's take on a woman's place in America, Ewen also states that

historical circumstances propelled [immigrant women] into a new urban society that redefined the nature of daily life and cultural expectation. This new world undermined the basis of traditional womanhood, forcing [them] to look in two directions at once: to the past for the strength to sustain their lives in the present, and to the future to find a new means of survival. (16)

Describing the sort of atmosphere in which many immigrants were raised, Ewen tells us that “these women came from cultures that saw them as inferior, subordinate, and even ignorant” (30), which was why traditional Judaism assumed their need for protection and rarely recognized a woman’s place in society without contextualizing it in terms of the man or men she served. For many female immigrants, staying in the Lower East Side community meant gender-based marginalization within their own religion, a marriage in which they were dominated by the will of their husband, hard-toiling domestic duties, and little to no social interaction outside of the tenement building, whereas life beyond the boundaries of the ghetto symbolized more personal freedom, greater economic opportunity and the possibility of marrying a man who did not expect such submissive devotion based solely on religious piety or cultural heritage. For Anzia Yezierska, existence outside the confines of the East Side meant education, independence and, perhaps most importantly, no Jewish men expecting her to uphold the old ways of their society.

Illustrating the staid mentality against which the main character revolts in *Bread Givers*, for example, Sara Smolinsky elucidates her situation, as well as that of her mother and sisters, by describing their obligation to support her father, an orthodox rabbi, and explaining that their entry into heaven is dependent upon the purity of *his* soul. Her father is, Smolinsky bitterly asserts, the key to the afterlife for all of the women in his family, and his mindset is one in which

the prayers of his daughters [don’t] count because God [doesn’t] listen to women. Heaven and the next life [are] only for men. Women [can] get into heaven . . . only if they [cook] for the men, and [wash] for the men, and [don’t] nag or curse the men out of their homes; only if they let the men study the Torah in peace, then, maybe, they [can] push themselves into Heaven with the men, to wait on them there. (9-10)

“‘Don’t forget it that you’re only a man of the earth,’” the elder Smolinsky tells one of his daughters’ erstwhile suitors. “‘I’m a man of God. Wouldn’t Bessie get a higher place in Heaven supporting me than if she married and worked for you?’” (46). Ideally, this was not a form of subjugation for the female, but an act of piety—in Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*, for instance, the title character, a former religious scholar, claims that “waiting on one’s husband and ‘giving him strength to learn the law’” (meaning the Torah, or “Written Law,” and the Talmud, a “compilation of Jewish Oral Law”; Irving 520) “[is] a ‘good deed’” (Cahan *Levinsky* 29)—and for many families in eastern Europe such comportment was the norm. The patriarch of the Smolinsky household is one of a number of “orthodox, middle-class Jewish fathers who had been raised to maintain the religious traditions and practices of Eastern European Jewish life,” and who, due to their strict religious leanings, “opposed migration” to America until it became an absolute financial necessity (Ewen 53). “Many of these fathers,” Ewen writes, “considered America ‘*trayf*,’ or not kosher” (53), and a support network of like-minded Jews was harder to find in the United States, where religious piety frequently began to wane upon arrival, than in Russia and its territories. This often meant that a father’s struggle to keep his family pious in the ‘unclean’ American environment became an all-out spiritual war wherein the battleground was the home and factions were divided along generational lines. Many a skirmish ensued between immigrants and their children as the latter began to absorb the American mentality and left their parents’ religion behind, resulting in an environment where piety and modernity were considered mutually exclusive and in which rigid Jewish orthodoxy was deemed anachronistic by the majority of New York youth.

Given that religion was such an important factor in the lives and culture of many eastern European immigrants prior to making landfall in the new world, Sara's description of female Jewish life sheds light on the way that religion, and, in particular, old world orthodoxy, clashed with the legendary freedom supposedly available to all in the United States. Reb Smolinsky's "rigid conception of Jewish womanhood" (Kessler-Harris Introduction xxxv) is also addressed by Rose Cohen in her autobiography *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*, albeit in slightly less exclusionary terms. According to Cohen, who was born Rahel Gollup "in a small Russian village" (9) and left for America at the age of twelve, a pious family's problems were frequently ascribed, by its women, neighbors and kinsmen, to a lack of religious devotion on the part of a negligent husband or father. Illustrating an environment wherein the presence of czarist forces and the threats of starvation, conscription and death loomed large in everyday life, Cohen recounts her father's arrest and subsequent ill-treatment before escaping to America (16-19) as well as describing the executions she heard during her own flight across the Russian border (56), and while her observations may seem to make the head-of-household's Talmudic studies a supremely selfless endeavor—one in which his family's physical as well as spiritual wellbeing was decidedly in his hands—they also serve to illustrate females' reliance on their spiritual provider. Cohen tells us, for instance, that her grandmother would often chastise her grandfather, complaining that "all her troubles came because of his impiety" (33-34), and such dependence meant that, outside of a life spent at home supporting the one in whom lay your only hope of entering heaven, there was not much of a place for a woman in Judaism, and, as such, in eastern European Jewish culture. In fact, one of the most upsetting things about her father's departure for America ahead of the rest of the family is, according to Cohen,

that it severely curtails her aunt's chances of settling into the role traditionally taken on by women in her position. "When grandmother realized that his emigration had lessened Aunt Masha's prospects of marriage," she writes,

her peace was gone. She wept night and day. "Poor Masha," she moaned, "what is to become of her? Her chances had been small enough without a dowry. And now, burdened with an aged father and a blind[,] helpless mother, the best she can expect is a middle-aged widower with half a dozen children!" (29)

This revelation worries the family so much that Masha, along with Rose, is the first person sent to the United States when two pre-paid steamship tickets arrive in the mail from New York. Prior to their departure, Rose's grandmother reiterates the importance of the decision to send her daughter abroad by telling her daughter-in-law that "'Masha has just begun to live, and in America she will have a better chance, for there are fewer women there, they say. . . . When I am lonely, I shall think of her happily married and surrounded by dear little children like yours'" (31). The fact that Rose goes on to marry in America (Dublin *xiii*) and her aunt does not is, given the circumstances, rather ironic.

Masha Gollup's situation is not unique – and neither, it seems, are her mother's fears for her marital wellbeing. Circumstances in the Russian empire were conspiring to make marriageable Jewish men increasingly rare as young males left in droves to 'make their fortune' in America, to pursue courses of higher education closed to them in their native land, or simply to avoid being pressganged into military service à la *Bread Givers*' Moisheh Smolinsky, who, in his youth, bribed military officials and left for the new world with his wife in order to avoid such conscription and deteriorating economic conditions (33-34) (for while the czar considered Jews beneath formal educational instruction, business, and all but the poorest living

conditions, he had no qualms about sending them into battle to die on his behalf). Ewen reports, rather succinctly, that “the draft and emigration made eligible men scarce” (45), and this paucity is precisely what worries Cohen’s grandmother: for, as we will see in Chapter Three, which discusses the competitive bidding process involved in securing a pious fiancée for one’s daughter in the old country, the dearth of single Jewish men in Russia and its territories allowed those left behind to become desirable commodities whose families could dictate the financial terms of their potential marriages, thereby ensuring that the negotiation of a dowry remained integral to the engagement process, if not more critical than it had been in previous decades. As such, Masha’s lack of a dowry weighs on her more heavily than it would have on the women of previous generations, and, in reality, even if she were able to scrape a modest one together it was not guaranteed that she could secure a husband of quality without immigrating to the west.

Ewen details the dangers of a union with such men as were left in the shtetl—many of whom were desirous of emigration and would be willing to marry in order to secure the means of doing so—by claiming that many used the scarcity of suitors to their advantage and “married in order to get to America” (53). “The young husband,” she reports, using the income of the dowry, “would go ahead to earn money for the wife’s ticket. But newlywed husbands who sent back divorces instead of tickets were a major problem” (53). Fannie Shapiro, an immigrant featured in Sydelle Kramer and Jenny Masur’s *Jewish Grandmothers* (1976), recalls such instances by stating that ““you got married, [he] took the money, and left you right away [for] America. Sometimes he sent for you; sometimes he found somebody else that he liked better, and forgot you. Sent you a divorce”” (Kramer & Mansur 7). The perils of this situation were twofold, for if this eventuality were to occur the woman in question

would be doubly damned. She would be a divorcée—a difficult, marginalized position for a woman living in a culture which defines her existence in relation to the men with whom she is associated either by birth or marriage—and she would have to contend with the loss of her dowry, which, combined with her status as a divorcée, would make it difficult to obtain another suitor with so many women pursuing the available men left in their communities. In characteristically caustic fashion, Moisheh Smolinsky tells one of his daughters, Fania, who is desperate to leave the rich husband her father has forced upon her, that “[people] will say . . . he threw [her] out” and “[her] chances for marrying again [will be] lost forever, because no man wants what another turns down” (Yeziarska *Bread Givers* 85), and despite the bluntness and bullying tone of his statement he does manage to shed a bit of light on such situations as were happening ‘back home’ in the Pale of Settlement. In *Yekl*, too, Abraham Cahan tells a story remarkably similar to what Shapiro describes (although his main character, Jake, brings his wife to New York City before divorcing her for someone else), and stories like these, repeated often in the old country, convinced many impressionable young women that their only hope of finding—and, appositely, *keeping*—a decent match lay on foreign shores. Such convictions are addressed by Anzia Yeziarska in “The Miracle,” one of the short stories in *Hungry Hearts*, in which, as Ewen puts it, “a poor, undowered Polish girl whose chances for marriage [are] slim” has her dreams suddenly “kindled” by a letter from the United States (*Immigrant Women* 53), and the belief, however exaggerated, that “matchmakers are out of style [in America] and a girl can get herself married to a man without the worries of a dowry” (Yeziarska *Hungry Hearts* 115) is the driving force behind the Gollups’ decision to send Masha to live with her brother in the United States before even his wife and children make the journey.

Although marriage and religion are not necessarily the driving forces behind Cohen's narrative, they are mentioned on a number of occasions and they usually appear in a context similar to that embodied by the more conservative characters in Yeziarska's fiction. The role to which most Jewish women were traditionally relegated—the role of wife and mother, which also included being a cook, cleaner, launderer and anything else that would support her husband in all of his endeavors—was, however, changing in New York City during what Roediger dubs the “long early twentieth century,” a period “defined by the mass arrival of new immigrants beginning in the 1890s and by their victories and defeats in struggling for full political, cultural, and economic citizenship” (9), and women in the Lower East Side were often afforded an opportunity to work outside of the home, particularly if they were young and single. As is addressed in Chapter Four, “‘The Democracy of Beauty,’” employment in the garment industry was available for those willing to endure long hours and near-intolerable conditions; but, even then, many women dreamed of meeting a man and retiring from the trade before the physically demanding nature of shop life took its inevitable toll and irrevocably compromised their feminine allure. One of Masha Gollup's friends, for example, a girl who “had been a pretty blonde” when Rahel came to America, but who is now described as having “no colour [*sic*]” in her face and “stoop[ing] as she walk[s],” confides to Rose on the eve of the latter's engagement that she is “‘tired of the shop’” and “‘want[s] something more than a folding cot for [her] home’” (214), making it clear that she considers marriage her only way out of a life spent toiling in a clothing factory. Rose's father seems to think this is true for his daughter as well, and shortly after her arrival in New York, upon noticing how late her father comes home every night, Cohen, then still known as Rahel Gollup, asks “‘does everybody in America live like this? Go to work early,

come home late, eat and go to sleep? And the next day again work, eat, and sleep? Will I have to do that too? Always?’” Her father’s answer is indicative of what was expected of a Jewish girl in Rahel’s situation: Cohen reports that he “looked thoughtful and ate two or three mouthfuls before he answered. ‘No,’ he [says][,] smiling. ‘You will get married’” (74). For her father, Rose’s wedding is a foregone conclusion, and it will allow her an escape from physical labor in addition to providing for her in the afterlife. A woman without a husband in a culture that is centered on religion—and in which that religion is only seriously available to and pursued by men—is a woman without a definite place in the world; she becomes a sociocultural oddity and is looked upon with pity or, in some cases (such as *Bread Givers*’ Reb Smolinsky, who claims that “‘no man wants what another turns down’”; 85), contempt. Highlighting the importance of the wedding process and the manner in which it affected a woman’s social standing—and, conversely, elucidating the lack of esteem given to single women—is the fact that after Rose agrees to marry a young man in the grocery business “a new life beg[ins] for [her family], and for the second time [she] bec[omes] an important person” (211), the first instance of such importance being during the flurry of activity preceding her emigration from Russia. The revelation of the change in status attending Rose’s betrothal stands her in stark contrast to her aunt, who, despite looking “contented” and taking part “at engagements and weddings with an ‘elderly aunt’ air” (214), is so upset by her own unmarried state that she cannot share the rest of the family’s joy over Cohen’s betrothal. Indeed, the latter’s claim that Masha “had settled herself down to a single life” (214) paints too rosy a picture; in the very next sentence Rose admits that during the preparations for her niece’s wedding “there were times when she would not talk to

us and she looked morbid and cried for days and days,” which indicates just how despondent the poor woman’s situation has made her feel.

In context, Rahel Gollup was more fortunate than most young women in her position as her father gave her the choice of saying either yes or no to “an ‘alliance’” with another family’s son (204), yet the decision proves to be a difficult one. Cohen is, after all, as her father describes her while considering the engagement, “‘a girl without a cent to her name’” (204) and traditional marriages required a dowry. This would have made the family feel extremely lucky when Israel, the young man in question (and a businessman, at that; Rose’s father, arguing the point, says “‘the smallest business man is worth ten workingmen,’” 205), agrees to marry Rose without financial incentives. According to Elizabeth Ewen, in Europe, and in Russia in particular, “arranged marriages cemented occupational and religious alliances” “and the dowry was an important component of the marriage agreement.”

Since the draft and emigration had made eligible men scarce, families needed money to secure marriageable men for their daughters. The most eligible brides came from scholar families or had ample dowries; poor women had to rely on what their mothers could save out of their earnings. (45)

In the United States as a whole such practices were less widespread, but on the Lower East Side, where many Jews were struggling to maintain their old world ways, the tradition persisted despite Ewen’s claim that “many women resented the marriage system, and the dowry in particular. Too many daughters could be a liability,” she writes, “and matchmaking easily turned into commerce, a humiliating experience for some” (45). Such is the case in *Bread Givers* when Moisheh Smolinsky and his wife bargain away their daughter, Bessie, who does not have a dowry, by assuring her prospective husband of her aptitude for housekeeping, physical labor and wage earning in order to make up for the family’s lack of compensation: the haggling

process demeans their embarrassed daughter, making her face grow “red with shame at the fake talk” they employ to “sell her over to Zalmon” (104). For the Gollups, however, such a discussion is mooted when it becomes apparent that Israel will take Rose with or without a dowry, and an ‘occupational alliance’ with the youth’s shop-owning family seems like a dream come true given that they have no financial incentives to offer the groom. And, as if marrying their daughter off without a dowry is not fortuitous enough, there are other benefits to such a union as well, for marrying into a business benefits not only Rose, but her entire family. “My people could live near and get things at cost price,” Gollup muses; “bread, butter, sugar, potatoes” – “it will be a great help” (R. Cohen 206). Even though Rahel has serious reservations about wedlock, she tells herself “‘Father is poor and I am not strong’” (205), which sentiment echoes her mother’s thoughts on the matter, and considers the fact that such a “‘luck match’” (Yeziarska *Givers* 96) is not likely to present itself again in the future. After all, many men in the Lower East Side would accept a wife without a dowry only if she were fit enough to work after the wedding (Shenah Smolinsky supports this idea when, bargaining for her daughter’s engagement, she avers that “‘such golden hands’” as Bessie’s “‘[are] like money in the bank’”; 104), and Cohen is weak with chronic anemia and cannot work more than a few days in any given shop before needing rest and medical attention. As such, her labor and wage earning capabilities—the only things she and her family really have to offer a potential suitor—are in question as well (Cohen says that her parents “‘felt they must hide the truth even at the cost of lying, for . . . what man would marry a sick girl!’”; 196), and even Rahel herself begins to believe, by the end of the matchmaking process, that a marriage like the one she is being offered is an extraordinary opportunity.

Complicating Rose's decision further, irrespective of questions of dowry and eligibility, is the fact that with her parents so excited by the prospect of marriage Cohen feels she must put aside her own trepidation, yield to her father's wishes and give her assent to wed; Jewish filial obligation, after all, required no less. Young Rahel Gollup may not have been thinking about the decision to marry in terms of traditional filial piety *per se*, but she knows how much this "alliance" (204) means to her father and has trouble denying him the excitement and pleasure he obviously feels at the thought of his daughter's betrothal. Cohen notes that when the matchmaker returns positive news from Israel's family "Father was so pleased that his face became quite radiant. He sat back in his chair and laughed joyously" (204), she writes before describing "how happy his face looked and how cheerfully he spoke" when discussing "the coming engagement" (211). With such a golden opportunity on the table—a marriage with no dowry, a businessman for a son-in-law, and discounted food available for the whole family after the wedding—it is no wonder the man brightens at the thought of what is to come, and if she says no Rose thinks her "father would feel that [she] . . . had a chance to better things and did not do so" (206). Cohen considers how her family would react were she to decide not to wed her prospective husband, and in doing so she imagines a "dimly lit home, father cross and irritable, mother sorrowful, always the same with no change and no hope" (206), and, although her view of married life is equally black, the prospect of such a dismal home life worries Rose; she cannot bear the thought of causing her parents such sorrow, and this is what ultimately leads her to agree to the union. "It is clear," Rahel tells herself, considering both the economic and familial consequences of a refusal, "that I must marry" (205) – yet with this realization comes another, more melancholic one. "It struck me how similar my fate was to my mother's," she says, "and now I recalled

many tragic incidents in my mother's early life" (206). A new sense of dread sets in as Gollup reviews all of the problems her mother encountered after marrying into her father's family, but she sees no plausible escape from her predicament and feels that, realistically, she must become the shopkeeper's wife. "Is that all there is in looking forward to marriage?" the girl asks herself – "an uneasy fear—and what is love!" (206). The lack of love in her impending engagement frightens Rose, who has spent much of her youth in America and now subscribes to its view of marriage as a romantic endeavor, as does recalling her mother's early struggles, and she is convinced that she is "neither so good nor so patient as [her] mother" and "would run away" if things were not ideal in her new home (206); however, these fears are not enough to convince her to decline the hand that is being offered. Although Rose is presented with a 'choice,' there seems to be only one acceptable option.

Indeed, the decision whether or not to marry, although apparently Rose's to make, is not one that she ever thought she would *have* to make. This question was rarely asked of traditional Jewish girls—it was usually the purview of their father—and Cohen says that, when posed, "the question trouble[s] [her] . . . Somehow [she] ha[s] never quite realized that this question would really be put to [her] and that [she] would have to answer it" (204). Rose laments the weight of the decision and dreads its ramifications despite the fact that such a choice, in a traditional home at least, was a rare and wonderful thing. "“Why [do] I have to decide this?”” Cohen moans to herself, her mind “in a tumult.” She claims that “[she] had never been allowed to decide the smallest thing before,” not even “the shape of [her] shoes, [or] the length of [her] dress” (205), yet now she is expected to make what amounts to the single most important decision in a traditional eastern European Jewish girl's life and has trouble saying no despite the fear and trepidation that grip her. Given the circumstances, it is

no wonder that she agrees, albeit reluctantly; however, soon after the agreement is reached Rahel discovers that “the pleasure [she feels] in receiving the diamond ring [is] not as great as [she] had expected” (213) and realizes that, as an engaged woman, she now has “duties” that require her presence at her fiancée’s family functions. These “new duties” will become much more demanding once she is wed, and her obligations make her realize how truly uncomfortable she is with idea of marrying into Israel’s family. Although she risks the fury of her prospective in-laws (her thwarted mother-in-law, for example, sends a scathing message in which she “‘pray[s] that [Rose] may have a thousand bridegrooms but not one shall [she] marry,’” invoking, in her anger, the most horrible of all fates for a Jewish girl – that of an ‘old maid’; 229), Gollup is allowed to break off the engagement when she finally finds the courage to admit that she is miserable at the thought of marrying the young man with whom the matchmaker has paired her. Though he is very disappointed—as is her mother, who “crie[s] bitterly” at the news (229)—Rose’s father agrees to let her end it, telling her, despite his own ability to do so, that “‘no one can force [her]” and “‘if [she] feel[s] so unhappy [she] need not marry him’” (226). As Yezierska highlights in *Bread Givers*, many daughters of the ghetto were not so lucky, and the traditional role of women—one that was both religiously and socially inferior to men and, at the same time, almost completely dependent upon them for both terrestrial and religious deliverance—is one that the author rebelled against her entire life, both biographically (wherein Kessler-Harris claims that she “left home at the age of seventeen, rejecting her parents’ attempt to mold her into acceptable roles”; Introduction xxvi) and in her fiction.

In her introduction to a recent edition of *Hungry Hearts*, Blanche Gelfant describes the writer’s life and her inspiration for *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers*,

giving details of a young Anzia's fight against the traditional way of life that would dictate her subservience to and, ultimately, her dependence on first her father and then a husband. According to Gelfant,

in 1899, when Yeziarska was about seventeen years old, she left her parents' tenement flat and went to live at the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, one of . . . [New York City's] charitable shelters. She knew that dutiful Jewish daughters, ruled by their father, remained at home until they married; then, under a husband's rule, they would carry on a way of life traditional to women of the old world. . . . Yeziarska wanted a new life in the new world of America . . . but her personal desires conflicted with her familial duties, especially a daughter's duty to her father. In *Bread Givers*, Yeziarska would draw upon her sisters' histories to describe the lives of three dutiful daughters . . . brokered into . . . marriage[s] of misery. In the opening story of *Hungry Hearts*, young Shenah Pessah resists this fate by declaring her independence as a woman of the new world: "I'm living in America," she says, "not in Russia."¹⁰ The difference, Yeziarska implied, meant the chance for a new life as an American. (Gelfant *xiii*)

For Yeziarska, buying in to this "old world" tradition meant eschewing any real hope of becoming American—even if she was skeptical of the degree to which Americanization could, or should, take place—and this is why her main characters rarely, if ever, commit themselves to a lifestyle typical of earlier generations. Poor record keeping and the author's penchant for revising her history with "omissions and half-truths" (Stubbs Introduction *ix*)—Amy Koritz, for one, writes that she "freely . . . and . . . repeatedly" "altered and reinvented" her past (113)—make her biographical information sketchy, at best (Thomas Ferraro, in *Ethnic Passages*, for example, and Blanche Gelfant, Vivian Gornick, Alice Kessler-Harris and Gay Wilentz, among others, all give varying accounts of Yeziarska's early years), but if *Bread Givers* is any indication, submitting to her father's view of religion, marriage and family was, in the writer's mind, akin to taking on a life of never-ending submissiveness, servitude and misery. As Moisheh Smolinsky puts it in the novel, "any man who

¹⁰ Yeziarska *Hearts* 15

falls in love with a pretty face don't think to marry himself. If a man wants a wife, he looks for one who can cook for him, and wash for him, and carry the burden of his house for him'" (64). These lines, spoken by a very traditional man about what conservative Jewish men desire (a wife willing to take on "bloody toil"; 147), are diametrically opposed to the freedom that Yeziarska believed—or at least hoped—was available to women in the new world. "America," writes Kessler-Harris, "offered two things, both equally unattainable for the shtetl woman and, Yeziarska was convinced, simultaneously available in America. America held out the possibility of love and of satisfying work" (Introduction xxx).

Yet for Yeziarska's family, her attempts to find "satisfying work" and avoid an arranged marriage in favor of "the possibility of love" were unacceptable. "Because she was a woman," Kessler-Harris asserts, "that was sinful" (xxix); her actions constituted a "reject[ion] [of] family life and violated Jewish tradition." "The struggle out of poverty," she contends, which included struggling out of the home, out of traditional Judaism, and arriving in the company of *bona fide* Americans, "never easy, posed for women a unique problem. Those who shared the mobility aspirations of a larger society had to violate family and community tradition in order to achieve them" (xxxv). Just as *Hungry Hearts* examines the intense desire to find "the life higher" outside of the ghetto (Yeziarska *Hearts* 63), *Bread Givers* illustrates, in no uncertain terms, the consequences of ignoring or letting go of that desideration and thus agreeing to perpetuate Gelfant's "old world" tradition in twentieth-century America, as well as emphasizing the ongoing conflict one undertakes when violating what Kessler-Harris calls the "family and community tradition" of eastern European Judaism. Ironically, during her time at the Clara de Hirsch Home Anzia Yeziarska was awarded a scholarship to study at Columbia University but "found herself

shunted into euphemistically named courses preparing her, against all her inclinations, to become a cooking teacher” and earn a living performing tasks that she had left home to avoid doing for the rest of her life as a daughter, wife and mother (Gelfant *xiv*). The writer did marry twice in her lifetime, although she left her first husband “the morning after the night of the wedding” (*xv*), annulling the marriage six months later, and separated from her second husband (whom she married in a religious ceremony in order to avoid legal complications, resulting in his having to formally adopt their daughter), and after living as a single parent in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, Yeziarska moved back to New York City and gave custody of their daughter to the girl’s father. Kessler-Harris reports that “Yeziarska did not take well to cooking and housekeeping” and that “marriage proved too restrictive for her explosive personality” (*xxvi*), and most of her biographers, including her own child (who, Ferraro claims, contributes to the misrepresentation of her mother by playing “the neglected but adoring daughter” in her 1988 memoir *Anzia Yeziarska: A Writer’s Life*; Ferraro 56), assume that Yeziarska’s trouble with marriage stemmed from her desire to write and what she perceived as a lack of freedom or time to do so thanks to her obligations as a wife and mother. Yet regardless of her reasons for abandoning two husbands and a daughter for a life of independence, however hard that life may have been, it is obvious that the traditional ideals of matrimony and motherhood did not appeal to her.

The actions Yeziarska took in leaving her domestic life behind would have been, in her day, scandalous, especially for a Jewish woman – a situation mocked by the famous London Jewish writer (and purveyor of the term ‘melting pot’ in his play of the same name) Israel Zangwill when, in 1889, he and Eleanor Marx—the youngest daughter of Karl Marx—wrote a ‘corrected’ text for the end of Henrik

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* entitled *A Doll's House Repaired*. Ibsen's script, professionally produced in England for the first time that same year (Nahshon 19), culminates in the character of Nora making a dramatic decision to leave her family and thereby "created an uproar" in Victorian-era London (19). Jewish and Victorian ideas about home, family and motherhood, although being very different, religiously speaking, coincided with one another on the role of women and children as submitting to a patriarch and in considering the family home the center of life in general. Edna Nahshon, in her introduction to a collection of Zangwill's theatrical oeuvre entitled *From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot: Israel Zangwill's Jewish Plays* (2006), claims "the notion that a wife and mother would walk away from her family in quest of selfhood was deemed immoral and unnatural to most Victorians" (19), yet this is precisely what Yeziarska did years later in America, and to a similarly critical reception from her Jewish peers. Zangwill and Marx, both great admirers of Ibsen's work, "mocked this haughty condemnation" by rewriting the play's original climax such that "Nora repentantly begs for her husband's forgiveness and meekly remains at home," thus creating a "parodic reversal" of the original text in order to poke fun at the play's morally outraged reviewers (19). Zangwill was committed to an ideal of identity which straddled both 'Jewishness' and 'nativeness' in his own land, often referring to himself as a "'Cockney Jew'" because of his birth "within earshot of Bow Bells, traditionally the mark of a true Londoner" (5). In fact, in his most famous work, *The Melting Pot*, the central character, David Quixano, who has survived a Russian pogrom, extols the merits of racial tolerance and cultural understanding in New York – an exhortation in fictional form not unlike Yeziarska's attempts to find a place for immigrants somewhere between the old world and the new and to strike a balance

between rigid resistance to change and complete assimilation within the American cultural landscape.

While a traditional Jewess's place may have been in the home because of her gender-stratified religion, she was not necessarily cut out of the practice of that religion altogether. Indeed, religious piety *was* often something that women aspired to in Europe, even if the amount of religion available to them was relatively small when compared to that of the men in their community; Cahan's David Levinsky, for instance, describes a mother who is, before her untimely death, "passionately devout" and determined to procure a religious education for her son, and who, although "absolutely illiterate," "utter[s] meaningless words, in the singsong of a prayer, . . . with absolute earnestness and fervor, often with tears of ecstasy coming to her eyes" (11). Levinsky admits, however, that "she was not contented" with this situation "and the sight of a woman going to synagogue with a huge prayer-book under her arm was ever a source of envy to her" (11-12). Similarly, *Out of the Shadow* tells us that the Gollup family owned a few religious books in addition to their Torah, and that Cohen "read these again and again, and became very devout" (13). In a situation very unique for a Russian Jewish girl (her father seems to have been less strict than the majority of Jewish patriarchs), Rose was also allowed to "read the morning, noon and evening prayers, and sometimes [she] fasted for half a day." "Then I became less stubborn," she recalls, "and the quarrels between sister and myself became less frequent" (13). In fact, "with the exception of grandmother, [Rose] [is] the most pious and the most superstitious member of the family" while in Russia (19), and her grandmother, the most devout person in their home, entreats her granddaughter "to write [and tell her] whether there are any synagogues in America" before the girl leaves for New York (44). But despite her religious devotion, Cohen's assertion of piety is shaded in a way

that illuminates one of the major differences between the male and female versions of Judaism in the Gollups' old world *shtetl* life. As is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Three, "traditionally, Jewish culture reserved learning and religion for men" (Ewen 39), so eastern European Jewish women, largely untutored in the Torah and Talmudic studies, were frequently regarded as superstitious as they received little to no formal religious education and therefore—in the men's eyes, at least—had no solid textual or spiritual basis for their religious ideas. Their role, however, was in many cases a very important and symbolic one as their actions in maintaining a kosher home and handling the day-to-day affairs of the household in strict accordance with religious law formed the spiritual backbone around which the rest of the family built their faith.

Ewen contends that "the highly developed sense of community within the Eastern European *shtetl* was in part an attempt to offset the difficulties and dangers faced by an oppressed minority" (46). "Nationless and oppressed," she writes, "the Jews living in the *shtetls* in a sense turned their backs on the world they inhabited" (38); thus their community became "the manifestation of God's covenant with Israel, [and] the family was the living core of the community" (Howe 13-14). Given this description of the Jewish settlement, a woman's role as wife, mother, cook, and caretaker of the home—in other words, as the center of family life—becomes very important indeed. Without dedicated, pious women at the heart of traditional Jewish life, the embodiment of God's covenant with Israel falls apart as families become dysfunctional and communities disintegrate. Men, for example, were not supposed to trouble themselves with financial concerns – yet such concerns had to be addressed in order for families to procure the food, clothing and tools needed for everyday living. Ewen claims that "it was assumed . . . a true scholar did not know one coin from

another” (39) and Cahan’s David Levinsky says that men like his childhood mentor, “Reb (Rabbi) Sender,” are “described as having ‘no acquaintance with the face of a coin.’ All the money he usually handled,” Levinsky tells the reader, “was the penny or two which he needed to pay for his bath of a Friday afternoon” (*Levinsky* 29). However, when men like Sender, who are completely ill-acquainted with the minutiae of running a household or business, are considered model Jews, the women of the community must attend to such matters lest commerce would collapse for lack of support and want of management, leaving the entire town in shambles. In addition, while “the ideal man withdrew from the mundane world” in order to pray and study religious texts (Ewen 39), leaving his wife and children to run the practical matters of day-to-day life, he also left behind an interesting space in the family that had to be filled by his spouse – an area of spiritual life Myerhoff calls “‘domestic religion’” (256), “that link between scholasticism and daily ritual” (Ewen 41). Cahan’s main character says that his mother “knew how to bless the Sabbath candles and recite the two or three other brief prayers that our religion exacts from married women” (*Levinsky* 11), and her piety in this arena is evident in the way that she slaves and sacrifices in order to send her son to a religious primary school, or *cheder* (Irving 520), and, as he gets older, to study Talmud at the synagogue every day with the village’s most pious and scholarly men. Levinsky’s mother is, in a very real way, the “link between scholasticism and daily ritual” in her son’s life: her work allows him to pursue the sort of education deemed important for a young Jewish man, and her dedication to “daily ritual” lays the groundwork upon which his spiritual wellbeing (and therefore, according to Jewish custom, her own as well) is built and maintained. According to rules “handed down from generation to generation,” “these rituals included keeping a kosher home, preparing for the Sabbath and holidays, lighting the

Sabbath candles and taking a *mikveh* (purification bath)” (Ewen 41), all of which were extremely important to the religious life of the family as a whole. While the men were away and the women were cleaning and preparing for the Sabbath, there was prayer followed by housework, the latter, remembers a woman named Rachel, often divided amongst the girls in a speech “‘made very carefully, as carefully as the prayers, . . . just like [it] was a part of God[’s will], even though it wasn’t in Hebrew”” (qtd. in Myerhoff 234-235), which signifies the importance of the tasks as not only quotidian domestic duties, but as acts of worship and piety in and of themselves. According to Ewen, “while everyday life—the home, the garden, and the marketplace—were realms given over to women because of their inferior status, these realms also maintained the customs of Jewish life” (47), and this statement embodies the paradox inherent in a traditional Jewish female’s existence. Old world life dictated that a woman stay at home and support her family, and, in turn, the community; yet it was the women in this role that allowed the community that pressed them into domestic life to continue, perpetuating a style of living which prescribed their status as laborers and second-class citizens. “Women’s lives,” Ewen writes, “were bound by a system of patriarchal obligation, but their world in large part created the social cement that enabled the culture to continue” in Russia and its territories (47).

Problems arise, however, when the eastern European ideal of the woman as the center of the home—and, therefore, as the center of God’s covenant with the Jews—collides with the American ideals of freedom and opportunity for all, and as, concomitantly, religion’s status as the fulcrum of daily life is diminished in the new world. Some fathers, like Yeziarska’s own, tried to carry that covenant with them through Ellis Island and into New York, and the clashes with their wives and

daughters that ensued led many an aspiring American girl to see her father as old-fashioned, unyielding and tyrannical as she tried to break the cycle that had kept her mother and grandmother subject to their husbands' complete authority. Kessler-Harris asserts that

autobiographies like Rose Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*, Lucy Robins Lang's *Tomorrow Is Beautiful*, Emma Goldman's *Living My Life*, Rose Pesotta's *Bread Upon the Waters* and Rose Schneiderman's *All For One* offer poignant testimony to the pain of women who rejected the injunction to marry and rear families as their major responsibility. They indicate that the current of discontent ran deep. (xxxv)

"Yeziarska speaks for all of them," she argues, "and nowhere more fully than in *Bread Givers*."

Yeziarska's dark take on the life she was endeavoring to avoid is evident in *Bread Givers* as Sara Smolinsky's father, Moisheh Smolinsky, first drives off the men his daughters love and then forces three of his girls into situations that he believes will benefit his own interests rather than making his children happy. When paid to play matchmaker for Zalmon, the local fish-peddler, Smolinsky, knowing that Zalmon has recently received "lodge money for his wife's death" and "become a rich man" (94), pockets the fee and recommends his own daughter for marriage, effectively killing two financial birds with one stone, while also convincing the man to pay extra recompense for the impending loss of his daughter's wages. What is most interesting about this transaction, however, is the way the two men talk about Bessie when striking a deal. Zalmon, who is fifty-six years old, is looking for someone who "'mustn't be lazy'" and will "'stay home and cook for me and clean the house and look after the children'" (93), and Reb Smolinsky, before seeing Zalmon's wealth firsthand in the form of a "glittering gold" watch and chain (94), initially recommends a widowed horseradish seller but changes his mind after receiving an advance on the

matchmaker's bounty and realizing how desperate the peddler is to find a stepmother for his six children. Before revealing the identity of the girl he has found for Zalmon, Smolinsky describes her as

young, innocent, a picture for the eyes. She'd cook for you, and wash for you, and carry the whole burden of your house for you. Your children will have a mother and you will have a wife like in the good old days and not one of those new smart women that boss their husbands. She's quiet as a dove and she'll look up to a man with proper respect. (96)

Excited by this rhetoric, Zalmon seems beside himself with anticipation – and upon learning whom it is that Smolinsky is recommending, he declares that “it's an honor for me to be your son-in-law. Your daughter [has] made a name for herself [by] . . . work[ing] the nails off her fingers for your family.” Moisheh also brags that “from the time she was no higher than this table she [has] worked for me. To this day she hands me all her wages” (97), and both men agree that “a good daughter makes a good wife.” Even after Zalmon agrees to the match Reb Smolinsky continues to extol her virtues in order to keep the man from changing his mind due to Bessie's frigid demeanor, and this time he is joined by his wife. “Her cooking! You ought to taste her *gefülte* fish!” exclaims Shenah Smolinsky. “Her *tzimes*! It melts in the mouth with a thousand tastes of Heaven. Her fried potato *lotkes*—in the dearest restaurant you can't buy anything so grand!” (102-103). Mrs. Smolinsky follows her husband's lead, even going so far as to lie about her daughter's abilities as a seamstress in order to keep Zalmon interested (104), because “girls have to get married” (12). In the end, Bessie's compassion for Zalmon's youngest son, Benny, leads her to agree to the marriage even though she shudders at the peddler's touch “as if a snake ha[s] bitten her” (110), and Sara describes how she “[goes] about, white-faced and scared, as if she ha[s] been caught in a trap and [can't] get out” and

“moan[s] like an animal hurt to death” (107) before the “horror” of her “black wedding” (108).

These exchanges leave little doubt as to just what, in Yeziarska’s opinion, was expected of a pious Jewish woman, and even Shenah Smolinsky, for all her help in trying to get Bessie to marry a man that she does not love—and who idolizes her husband’s old world religious piety (Sara claims that her mother “lick[s] up Father’s every little word, like honey,” and describes how “Father’s holiness fill[s] her eyes with light”; 12, 16)—seems to rue her plight even as she submits to her husband’s tyranny. The author sums up the situation, and her own feelings on the matter, in the frustrated words of Smolinsky’s wife, who, made brave in a fit of anger, tells him “‘you’re so busy working for Heaven that I have to suffer here . . . bitter hell’” (10), and who, later in the novel, replies to one of her husband’s taunts with a sharp ejaculation of “‘woe to us women who got to live in a Torah-made world that’s only for men’” (95). The traditional assumption that motherhood is its own reward and that children would brighten the home is also challenged in the book as Bessie marries into half a dozen stepchildren who do not appreciate her (she complains that “‘[she] can never do enough for them’” and that, despite her sacrifices, “‘nothing [she does] for [them] . . . is right’”; 177) and as Mashah blames all of her problems on her offspring. Although there are several brief flashes of genuine happiness and affection for the youngsters—Bessie’s care and compassion for Zalmon’s Benny, and Mashah’s claim, made while her children are gathered attentively at her feet, that when she has them thus she feels as if she is “holding the riches of heaven in [her] arms” (148) are prime examples—Yeziarska quickly overturns such sentiments in an effort to undercut the rewards and allure of such traditional Jewish thinking. Bessie’s tenderness is portrayed as a weakness that makes her complicit in her own downfall,

and which makes her subject to “the worst gangsters of the block” (who will “torture the life out of her” according to her mother, despite the latter’s part in arranging the match in order to ensure that her eldest daughter remains an “old maid” no longer; 95), and Mashah’s happiness retreats as quickly as it has come when the financial troubles of raising a family in the ghetto rear their ugly head again mere moments after she speaks of “holding the riches of heaven.” “I wish they were never born,” she wails (148); “it’s their innocence that chains me to this misery. I’m insulted by the milkman, shamed by the grocer, kicked like a dog by their father, all on account of them” (148). Yeziarska leaves little doubt about her opinion of filial obligation with regard to arranged marriages and the life they bring; in her work, submitting to an orthodox father begets an undesirable union with a man of his choosing, children who, despite their fleeting charms, are the bane of their mother’s existence, and worry heaped upon worry about finances, food, clothing and amenities.

Making matters worse for Mashah, Bessie, Fania and Sara is the fact that refusing to submit to the head of the household’s wishes—including bowing to his choice of suitors and propagating his view of a woman’s role in the home—was, in many a first-generation immigrant father’s mind, tantamount not only to wickedness and disobedience of the worst order, but to heresy and damnation as well. Reb Smolinsky’s conviction that proper wives and daughters look up to men “with that highest respect as only women in the good old days used to have” (102) is not one that he sees enacted to his satisfaction by women in the United States, and he equates his daughters’ lack of blind devotion to blasphemy, the blackest of sins, when he asks “what’s the world coming to in this wild America? No respect for fathers. No fear of God” (135). Even less domineering fathers such as Rahel Gollup’s—who, later in the narrative, lets his daughter decide whether or not to marry—were not immune to

this mode of thinking, and when Rose will not touch her food after an argument with him he commands her to eat her dinner and gives her lashes with a rolled-up towel when she refuses to comply. “‘Girl,’” he threatens, “‘I’ll break you if you don’t change’” (R. Cohen 95), which implies that the problem is not the act of disobedience itself, but the mindset that allows a young girl to challenge her father in his demands – and, embodying the struggle for power and independence touching so many families of her era, Rose, “in [her] heart,” answers “‘my father, we shall see!’” Going further than Gollup, however, who is not as devout as his fictional counterpart, Reb Smolinsky calls Sara’s ‘sin’ of “‘daring [her] will against [her] father’s’” “‘the crime of crimes against God’” (Yezierska *Givers* 137) and avers that “‘in olden times the whole city would have stoned you!’” This sentiment is one that, because of her traditional piety, Sheneh Smolinsky believes as well, and she stares at Sara “in horror” when she is bold enough to question him. “‘A daughter to talk that way of her own father?’” she chastises. “‘Even if he was a drunkard and a card-player, you owe him respect’” she admonishes her daughter (130), and because of his tyrannical behavior and her devoted submission this attitude spills over into the rest of the family. Even Bessie, the “‘dried-up old maid’” (98),¹¹ so lonely and miserable at the beginning of the novel, refuses to marry the man she loves in court without her father’s approval, stating that she “‘hasn’t the courage’” to live for herself (50) and “‘couldn’t marry a man that don’t respect [her] father’” (51) – a decision which allows Smolinsky to marry her off to Zalmon for monetary gain later in the text.

In the old world tradition, without total filial piety, strict obedience, and the prayers of their patriarch, the Smolinsky women are, according to Yezierska’s earlier explanation, never to enter heaven, and when his daughters try to avoid carrying out

¹¹ Smolinsky’s favorite term for his eldest daughter; see also *Givers* 78, 95, 103, 105

his wishes to the very letter an indignant Reb Smolinsky unleashes a torrent of righteous anger that withers most of them where they stand. “‘Women were always the curse of men,’” he spits at them, “‘but when they get older they’re devils and witches’” (95). Cruelly illustrating the point that women have no place in his version of society without the men they serve, he tells them that “‘the Torah [says] . . . a man has a right to hate an old maid for no other reason but because no man had her, so no man wants her’” (95-96). Based on his belief that a good woman is one who obeys, he also claims that “‘the devil [has] got[ten] into’” his daughters when they are not cowed before him and cries “‘no wonder it says in the Torah, “Woe to a man who has females for his offspring!”’” (95) – a lamentation he repeats more than once in the course of the narrative.¹² Only stubborn, idealistic Sara has the strength to withstand his wrath, and, after witnessing what Kessler-Harris calls “the horror and injustice of her sisters’ broken lives” (xxxv) due to their financially motivated “bread-and-butter marriages, like in Europe” (Yezierska *Givers* 81), she is determined not to let her father manipulate or bully her into a life she does not want. Accordingly, “Father’s never-ending pictures of the hell that [is] waiting” for her sisters (84) are nothing compared to what he has to say about his youngest daughter later in the book. “‘Blasphemer!’” he screams at her (138), striking her cheek. “‘Denier of God!’” But Sara, the youngest of the Smolinsky women, is too much of an “‘*Americanerin*’” to listen (144): she leaves her parents to live on her own, claiming that with her father’s blow “the Old World ha[s] struck its last on [her]” (138). Sara Smolinsky is not one to subscribe to the traditional view that “‘no girl can live without a father or a husband to look out for her’” (136-137), and her father’s and Zalmon’s eastern European mindset (wherein “‘it says in the Torah, only through a man has a woman existence.

¹² see also *Givers* 82

Only through a man can a woman enter Heaven,” and “‘a girl’s place is under her father’s hand’”; 137, 141) is not one with which she will ever agree. “‘It’s a new life now,’” she says. “‘In America, women don’t need men to boss them’” (137). For Yezierska, a girl’s escape from “‘under her father’s hand’”—or, for that matter, the hand of any traditional man—was the most desirable liberation imaginable. “‘Don’t worry for me,’” Sara tells Bessie later in the novel, “‘I’m free from Father’s preaching. The rest will go like flying’” (142).

After finding a room of her own—one with a door that allows her to shut out the world and have privacy (a rare commodity for a ghetto woman, and one which, according to Sara, “[is] life. It [is] air. The bottom starting-point of becoming a person”; 159)—Smolinsky begins to feel lonely as she works in a laundry and attends night school in an effort to gain further social and economic independence. However, when her sisters pay a visit to her dingy new abode she continues to deny the allure of their married lives despite the loneliness and squalor she is forced to endure by living on her own. “‘I’m better off than you married people!’” she exclaims. “‘It’s not a picnic to live alone. But at least I’ve no boss of a husband to crush the spirit in me’” (177). “‘Who wants to be an old maid?’” Fania cries, invoking that most dreadful of Jewish images, the “‘cursed old maid’” (95), but Sara responds by saying that she has no desire to wed. With night school, she has “‘set out to do something, and [she’s] going to do it, even if it kills [her]’” (177). Fania, driving home the way Sara’s orthodox family feels about the matter, says “‘it may not kill you. But if you’re left an old maid it’s worse.’” Sara Smolinsky does not agree with this, however. She believes that “‘the only sin on earth is to let life pass you by’” (182), which she believes her sisters have done by giving in to their father’s religious tyranny and accepting the role of traditional Jewish wives rather than fighting for their rights as women of the

new world. According to Sara's reasoning, she is, in fact, the only one in her family who is *not* sinning because she is attempting to live life without letting it "pass [her] by." This subversion of the traditional religious view that women are beholden to men for a place in the world (and, for that matter, in heaven) and Sara's reversal of the transgressive paradigm is radical thinking—and action—for a young ghetto woman, yet it is the product of a life lived in America and a key factor in endeavoring to become an American. Ewen maintains that "according to convention, only the poorest Jews—or the wealthy Christian gentry—married for love; love was supposed to come after the babies and the home" (44), and *Out of the Shadow* supports this statement as Rose, struggling to become an American and wrestling with the seemingly irreconcilable differences between new world love and old world marriage, breaks off her engagement by telling Israel, her fiancée, that she does not love him – to which he responds, "in a matter of course tone," that "[she] will love [him] after [they] are married" before giving Cohen "many instances of his uncles and his aunts and his mother" in order to bolster his case (227). In addition, many young women were engaged by their parents without ever having met the man they were to wed—a situation Yeziarska links to the old world when Reb Smolinsky asks his wife, in reference to his daughters' desire to pick their husbands for themselves, "'did we ever know of such nonsense in the old country? Did you even give a look on me, or I on you until the wedding was all over?'" (*Givers* 76)—so love before marriage was often out of the question for the daughter of a pious family.

In *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (1983), Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin report that a traditional eastern European bride "would, God willing, know her spouse . . . right after the ceremony like all respectable Jewish girls" (151), but Sara, like so many other young, Americanized women, is

adamant that she will marry for love, if at all, and she is determined not to marry an old-fashioned ghetto Jew. “No one from Essex of [*sic*] Hester Street for me,” she abjures (Yeziarska *Givers* 66). “I don’t want a man like Berel Bernstein,” she fumes, speaking of her sisters’ suitors, “whose head [*is*] all day on making money from the sweatshop. No, I wouldn’t even want one like Jacob Novak . . . if he ate the bread of his father who bossed him.” Sara will not stand for a marriage to an individual whom she herself does not pick – “[she] want[s] an American-born man who [*is*] his own boss” and who will “let [*her*] be [*her*] own boss” (66). Despite Moisheh Smolinsky’s exhortation that “‘a girl telling her father *this* man I want to marry’” is “‘shameless unwomanliness’” (75-76), Sara will not give in. “Here, in America,” she muses, “girls pick out for themselves the men they want for husbands” (76). For a new immigrant woman in Yeziarska’s Lower East Side, becoming an American meant throwing off the yoke of eastern European tradition and embracing the independent spirit they thought so characteristic of new world women. Like Bernstein, who announces to Reb Smolinsky, in response to the latter’s taunts over Bessie’s worth as a breadwinner, that he is “a plain ‘man of the earth’” and Smolinsky “‘can’t put none of [*his*] Heaven over on [*him*]’” (46), Sara is determined to have none of her father’s religion, especially if it means giving up her sense of self-worth and serving a man for the rest of her life. Eventually, Sara Smolinsky finds romantic fulfillment, but this is on her own terms and with an individual who respects her independence – a man named Hugo Seelig, whom she meets in the workplace during her career as a school teacher. Hugo’s presence in the story looks toward the future, but it also ties Sara to the past, as does the couple’s decision to invite the woman’s ailing father to live with them at the end of his life. Hugo is not a native-born American; he is, like Sara, a Polish immigrant (the two come “from villages only a few miles apart”; 277), albeit

one who has been “set free in the new air of America” (273), and Moisheh Smolinsky will agree to move into their house only if Sara “‘promise[s] to keep sacred all that is sacred to [her father]’” (295). In the course of the narrative, the young Jewish girl becomes one of a class of independent Jewish-American women that Abraham Solomon, a traveling agent for a charity network which helped move Jews from the East Side ghetto to environments in other cities more conducive to rapid acculturation, calls “more aggressive, freer from entangling alliances” and “more intuitively sympathetic” to the work of social reform than their male counterparts, and who have plenty of “practical sense and initiative” with which to achieve their ends (Rockaway *Words of the Uprooted* 65), but Sara Smolinsky’s life, at the end of the novel, is still shaded by the long shadow of her immigrant past as well being haunted by the specter of her father’s orthodoxy. This is apposite to Sara’s ongoing reformatory struggle, for, as we will see in Chapter Two, the class of reformers Smolinsky aspires to join had their work cut out for them as they negotiated the disparities between old world and new world systems of social and financial support.

Many elements of Sara’s struggle in *Bread Givers* would seem to be autobiographical when considered alongside Yeziarska’s own experiences as an immigrant woman in America during the early years of the twentieth century—themes such as rebelling against traditional parents, leaving home in order to avoid being forced into marriage, finding work, pursuing education, and fighting for independence amid the changing tide of religious and social life in the new world abound in both, as they do in all of the author’s work—yet to call Yeziarska’s fiction autobiographical would be to view it in a vacuum. It is true that she was not a typical Jewish-American woman, but, according to Alice Kessler-Harris, “if Anzia Yeziarska was not typical of immigrant women, neither was she unique.”

Her struggle, in lesser proportions, went on everywhere. A stubborn and unrelenting father, more firmly rooted in old world traditions than most, and a willful daughter, convinced of her own right to make choices, merely highlighted tensions implicit in the transition to the new world. (xxix)

Yeziarska's story echoes the clashes of many families, and Sara's path can be seen not only as one woman's quest for freedom and fulfillment, but as the embodiment of the younger generation's belief that life in America could, and should, be different from that to which prior generations had submitted. Smolinsky's journey is not a mirror of Yeziarska's life, nor is it solely an expression of the author's dream of reconciling the past with the present which culminates in the fusion of ideals inherent in bringing a traditional father to live with an educated, liberated daughter at the end of the text. It is, rather, a novel that in many ways characterizes the plight of the author's entire generation, and which represents the stories of countless contemporary immigrant women living in Jewish communities all over the United States. The text reverberates, ultimately, with the not-so-subtle rebellion of Yeziarska and her peers against religion, economic uncertainty, old world marriages, and the lack of education available to traditional Jewish women – and against the men who, by and large, controlled these circumstances in their lives.

“He Shaves His Beard!”¹³
The Changing Face of Jewish Piety

For all Yeziarska's critique of traditional Jewish men being “like stone” in their “high purpose of living for God and working for the good of the world” in

¹³ Cahan *Yekl* 35

America through the characters of Reb Smolinsky and his wife (*Bread Givers* 90), at the same time that the writer was challenging women's roles in the home—and, for that matter, in Judaism as a whole—male viewpoints regarding religion were also shifting dramatically in the new world. Alice Kessler-Harris, writing about Michael Gold and Abraham Cahan, contends that “Gold, like Cahan in *Yekl*, comments on the disjuncture between husbands who have found the way to the new world and wives who hang back, comfortable in their old patterns” (xxxiv), yet she also asserts that “Yezierska offers another and no less real syndrome: the wife who pleads, threatens, and nags her husband into American ways” (xxxiv). This latter claim speaks to the progress made by many immigrant women in the United States, as well as to some men's reluctance to acculturate; however, although women were treading new ground in education, labor and commerce in the U.S.—as evidenced by the autobiographies of Emma Goldman, Lucy Robins Lang, Rose Pesotta and Rose Schneiderman, among others—and some men sought to hold on to their old world ways, for the most part male adaptation, perhaps because of their traditional place outside of the home, as opposed to a woman's place *in* the home, where it was easier to ignore the external, social pressures of Americanization, was much more rapid and widespread. As the tide of anti-Semitism rose in the Russian Empire and wave after wave of Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Galician Jews rode the current of change to America's immigration checkpoints, each set of new arrivals sought to distinguish themselves from subsequent groups by leaving their greenness behind in favor of the red, white and blue of their new home – and often, especially for men, religion was the one of the first things to be eschewed as the quotidian compromises of American life began eroding the practices of conventional Judaism and making traditional piety very difficult to maintain in their new environment. For a woman spending most of her

time in the home, such as a newly-arrived wife or daughter, risking harassment such as that described by Rose Cohen against her father and other neighborhood men on election day, which included bonfires in the street and physical violence toward Jews (101-103), because of a Jewish appearance or mien was not an everyday threat like it was for their male counterparts, and the imminence of such accostation, along with the desire to become upwardly mobile, financially independent and socially acceptable in a society which valued homogeneity, caused a number of men to leave off the outward appearance of religion in order to facilitate integration. Coming as they were from areas experiencing incredible religious oppression, economic sanctions and pogroms at the hands of czarist forces in Russia, modern-day Poland and the “Pale of Jewish Settlement” (the “geographic area . . . of the Russian Empire in what is today, roughly, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine”; Rockaway *Words of the Uprooted* 3), many Jews were wary of appearing too old-fashioned in their dress and grooming or too orthodox in their habits – an appearance which might well spark further ostracism in the new world and, worse still, make them the object of such political or financial prejudice as might abrogate the upward mobility they so desired and struggled to achieve. Indeed, many a young Jewish man abandoned his religion entirely in the attempt to *oysgreen* himself, and even for those who did not leave their religion behind in Europe it was difficult to retain one’s original degree of orthodoxy in the United States. Indeed, Jewish orthodoxy was, to many at least, both Jew and Gentile alike, decidedly un-American, and as a consequence it was met with suspicion, criticism and, frequently, aggression.

Abraham Cahan, evoking such oppression in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, depicts the Russian town of Antomir—“a village in what is now Poland” (Irving

519)¹⁴ wherein Levinsky was born and raised prior to his American immigration—and includes a description of “a squalid little suburb known as the Sands” which is “inhabited by Gentiles exclusively” (Cahan *Levinsky* 9), and in which Jews, if they happen to tread, are mocked or attacked. Levinsky recalls “shouts of ‘Damned Jew!’” and “‘Christ-killer!’” and boys who would “sick their dogs” on Jewish interlopers, stating that “as we had no dogs to defend us, orthodox Jews being prohibited from keeping these domestic animals by a custom amounting to a religious injunction, our boys never ventured into the place except, perhaps, in a spirit of daredevil bravado” (9). He also tells of how he and his friends would sometimes take their favorite pastime of playing soldiers and “have a real ‘war’ with the boys of the next street” (11) and recounts a time when “the bigger Jewish boys of [his] street had a pitched battle with the Sands boys, an event which is one of the landmarks in the history of [his] childhood” (9). However, this is not enough to keep young David—and many other boys—from being continually harassed by the denizens of the Gentile neighborhood bordering his own, and he describes further incidents of bullying and violence which eventually result in his mother’s death. The taunts of these “Sands boys” would inevitably become crueler as Easter approached, Levinsky remembers, and one year when Passover coincided with that holiday young David was the subject of a particularly nasty attack. “Crossing the Horse-market” in the new clothes his mother had slaved and saved to buy him for Passover, he recalls, he happened upon “groups of . . . Gentiles, civilians and soldiers, who were rolling brightly colored Easter Eggs over the ground” (51). “My new long-skirted coat and side-locks provoked their mirth,” he writes, “until one of them hit me a savage blow in the face” and another “snatched off my new cap” “because our people considered it a sin to go bareheaded.

¹⁴ alternatively, a town in czarist Lithuania or “a fictional city . . . modeled on Vilna,” Lithuania (Chura para. 21)

And, as I made my way, bleeding, with one hand to my lip and the other over my bare head, the company sent a shower of broken eggs and a chorus of jeers after me (51-52). David's mother—a widow at this point—ignores her son's and neighbors' implorations "not to risk her life on such a foolhardy errand" and rushes off in fury to confront the boy's tormentors. "Fifteen minutes later," Levinsky recollects, "she was carried into our basement unconscious. Her face was bruised and swollen and the back of her head was broken. She died the same evening" (52).

These prejudiced actions, culminating in the brutal death of David's sole remaining parent, inculcate in him a sense of "dark white" otherness (Roediger 4) that he never quite escapes, no matter how hard the adult Levinsky tries to assimilate or how high he rises in the white world of New York; similar instances convinced other Jews of the dangers inherent in confronting anti-Semitic communities while also seeking to avoid compromising the obligations placed on them by their religion. In America, too, there were still epithets to be encountered despite the promise of religious freedom. After the bonfires and tussles of election day, which might have been bearable if it were the only time such instances occurred, Cohen writes that

[she] had seen from the first that Jews were treated roughly on Cherry Street. [She] had seen the men and boys that stood about the saloons at every corner make ugly grimaces at the passing Jews and throw after them stones and shoes pulled out of the ash cans. [She] had often seen these "loafers" . . . attack a Jewish pedlar [*sic*], dump his push cart of apples into the gutter, fill their pockets and walk away laughing and eating. (104)

She goes on to say that "to see a Jew maltreated was nothing new for [her]," and confides, perversely yet poignantly, that in America, "where there were so many new and strange things for [her] to see and understand[,] this was the one familiar thing." Rose, having lived in the czar's empire until the age of twelve, whereupon she left to join her father in New York, "had grown used to seeing strange Jews mistreated

whenever they happened to come to [her] village in Russia” (104), and many other immigrants, having witnessed similar oppression and wanting to ensure that anti-Semitic attitudes in the new world did not rise to czarist proportions and turn the United States into another May-Law-ridden Pale of Settlement, chose not to tempt fate by, as they saw it, flaunting their religion in front of others. For “the younger and ‘modern’ element” that moved to America (*Levinsky* 52), taunts like those observed by Cohen, the wider economic and educational opportunities available to those who were among the more assimilated classes, and mingling with Americanized Jews who had arrived prior to themselves—many of whom were, by the early twentieth century, more Jewish in terms of ‘race’ than religion—had a palpable effect and compromise became inevitable.

Some of the changes effected were almost purely superficial, such as when Rose’s recently-arrived eight-year-old brother demands “‘American’ shoes” of his parents and tries to ruin his sturdy Russian footwear by “knocking and rubbing [it] on stones” (151). “Shoes,” Cohen informs her audience, “more than any other article of clothing[,] showed the ‘greenhorn,’” and, eventually, tired of coming home in tears over the matter after being “tormented by the children in the street” (151), he throws his old shoes off a rooftop in order to force their parents to purchase new ones – an act that also prompts their father to purchase “a black strap of fringed leather with a wooden handle” with which to punish his son, and which he subsequently hangs in a prominent place on the back of a door (152). This serves, for his children, as a visual reminder of the price of disobedience, but it also embodies for the reader the constant struggle over Americanization which divided immigrant families along generational lines. Similarly, Anzia Yezierska calls attention to the younger generation’s view of clothing as a powerful acculturative force when, in the short story ‘Wings,’ *Hungry*

Hearts' Shenah Pessah contemplates her upcoming trip to the library with John Barnes. ““My whole life hangs on how I’ll look in his eyes,”” she says; ““I got to have a hat and a new dress. I can’t no more wear my ‘greenhorn’ shawl going out with an American”” (17). Levinsky, too, offers descriptions of Americans which elucidate the power of clothing, as when, shortly after disembarking at Castle Garden, one of New York City’s immigration checkpoints, he states that “the well-dressed, trim-looking crowds of lower Broadway [impress him] as a multitude of counts, barons, [and] princes” (*Levinsky* 91), and the “baronial dress and general high-born appearance” of the people he encounters on his first day in the city is something to which he aspires after the initial culture shock of his arrival ebbs. Nor was he alone in his aspirations: as Ferraro writes of Sara Smolinsky’s family, “the production of income permits consumption” (63), and consumption—especially the consumption of clothing, as we will see in Chapter Four—was a mark of Americanization affected by many contemporary immigrants. In Russia, after all, one was bound by a class system that prevented individuals like Levinsky from becoming “counts, barons, [or] princes” (to emphasize this point, W. H. Auden, in an introduction to Yeziarska’s *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), writes that “in the more advanced countries of Europe, like England, it had become possible for a talented individual to rise a class, a generation, but in Russia, above all for a Jew, it was still quite impossible; if . . . one had been born in the ghetto, then in the ghetto one would die”; 12), yet in the United States such a system was widely believed antiquated and inapplicable to a modern, industrialized society. According to Cahan, in “their Promised Land of today” there are

Jews born to plenty, whom the new conditions have delivered up to the clutches of penury; Jews reared in the straits of need, who have risen to prosperity; good people morally degraded in the struggle for success amid an

unwonted environment; moral outcasts lifted from the mire, purified, and imbued with self-respect; educated men and women with their intellectual polish tarnished in the inclement weather of adversity; ignorant sons of toil grown enlightened. (*Yekl* 14)

With this passage, Cahan, as he so often does, deftly describes the inversionary malleability of the social order which drew so many people to the new world as he declaims the changes undergone upon its shores. America held the promise of reinvention and reward for those willing and able to work for them, and it was not uncommon for those who had been wealthy in Europe to become poor in New York while individuals previously destitute rose to dizzying heights of financial success in the eyes of their new immigrant peers. As David puts it after succumbing to “the spreading fever” in Antomir, “the United States lured [him] not merely as a land of milk and honey, but also, and perhaps chiefly, as one of mystery, of fantastic experiences, [and] of marvelous transformations” (*Levinsky* 61), and when, fresh off the boat, he meets a man “literally aglow with diamonds and self-satisfaction” who is also “unmistakably” Jewish (90), this notion is reinforced. The protagonist claims that the man’s “very diamonds somehow [tell] a tale of former want, of a time when he had landed, an impecunious immigrant like [Levinsky]; and this [makes] him a source of living encouragement to [David]” (90). Cahan’s creation believes, as did many of his real-world counterparts, that if he can rise high enough in business to afford such “baronial dress” he will have access to the uppermost tiers of society; and although, in reality, this was not necessarily the case—as David Levinsky discovers in his later years—it was enough to make many men attempt “marvelous transformations” of their own. It comes as no surprise, then, that Levinsky makes a name for himself—and a tidy fortune—as a purveyor of American clothing, that self-conscious symbol of affected acculturation.

Not all outward changes made in such transformations were merely superficial, however, as a number of the physical attributes Levinsky and his fellow refugees modified for the new world were, and still are, governed by Jewish religious law and therefore have deeper spiritual implications than simple alterations made for the sake of fashion. For many, the transformation from ‘Jew’ to ‘American’ meant eschewing the outward accoutrements of religion in order to appeal to the mainstream, in effect trading long coats and earlocks for razors and smart suits, and when young David, the pious Talmudic scholar, describes the “source of living encouragement” he meets after arriving in New York by stating that “prosperity was written all over his smooth-shaven face” (90), the fact that he is “unmistakably one of [David’s] people” makes his possession of a “smooth-shaven face” extremely salient. For an orthodox Jew, shaving is a terrible sin, yet this man’s appearance has an oddly soothing effect on the newly-arrived Levinsky which foreshadows the latter’s transition to a more Americanized way of thinking. As we have seen, degrees of acculturation frequently ran along generational lines, but although Cahan’s “younger and ‘modern’ element” (52) was among the first to adopt American styles of dress and grooming, the older, more established Jews who came to the new world were by no means immune to their effect. Rose Cohen, for instance, describes her first impression of her father after meeting him at Castle Garden as one of shock, indignation, and even mild horror at the way he has altered his appearance. “Father was so changed,” she remembers. “I hardly expected to find him in [the] black long tailed [*sic*] coat in which he left home,” she writes, “but . . . [she anticipated] the same full grown beard and earlocks” he wore prior to his emigration (69). This is not the case, however, and she is flustered by the results of his tenure in the United States. Instead of being reunited with the *paterfamilias* she remembers, she encounters “a young man with a closely

cut beard and no earlocks” and “as [she] look[s] at him [she can] scarcely believe [her] eyes. Father had been the most pious Jew in our neighbourhood [*sic*],” she opines, and his westernized visage makes her wonder if “it [is] true . . . that ‘in America one at once [becomes] a libertine’” (69). Discovering that her father has cut his hair and shortened his beard in accordance with new world attitudes is disappointing for Rose; it checks her excitement at being in America and makes her feel “a little homesick” (69), as well as lowering her opinion of her father. Cohen, being newly arrived in the United States and having yet to witness in her new home the events of abuse previously described, questions her father’s religious devotion: “‘you had been so pious at home, father,’” she says after walking in on him during the act of trimming his facial hair (the sight of which she has never observed before, and which, although she has been aware of its occurrence for some time, is so shocking to behold that she can “neither speak nor move for some minutes”), “‘more pious than anyone else in our whole neighborhood. And now you are cutting your beard. Grandmother would not have believed it. How she would weep!’” (106). Embarrassed, the man defends his actions, stating, “in a tone that [is] bitter yet quiet,” that “‘they do not like Jews on Cherry Street. And one with a long beard has to take his life into his own hands,’” but his daughter’s sentiments are not unusual for Jewish newcomers who lay eyes on acculturating family members for the first time since, as David Levinsky puts it, “shaving is one of the worst sins known to our faith” (*Levinsky* 8).

Another of Cahan’s characters, Jake Podkovnik—known “as Yekl or Yekelé” in Russia (*Yekl* 10), and the namesake of the author’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*—is a man thoroughly caught up in the desire to acculturate, and he is described, after three years in America, as having a “clean-shaven[,] florid face” (2) with a “shaven upper lip” that looks “penitent” when he smiles (3). Cahan’s choice of

words in this passage is carefully considered, the narration subtly yet humorously drawing attention to the character's sin, and Jake's motive for transgressing becomes obvious as he is decried by one of his more traditional Jewish colleagues for believing that "'shaving one's mustache makes a Yankee!'" (6). Indeed, in this vein, one of the first physical attributes Anzia Yezierska mentions when describing men in her stories is the presence of a beard, if any, and its length – attributes which are, for her, an outward manifestation of an individual's old-world attitude; the longer the beard, according to Yezierska, the more traditional the man (*Bread Givers*' Moisheh Smolinsky and Zalmon, for example, both wear long beards, with the latter shaving his off—as well as wearing a new suit—to appeal to the younger, less religious Bessie as a potential suitor; 99). The orthodox injunction regarding razors and clipping one's beard also extends to cutting the hair at the temples, resulting in the distinctive "earlocks" Cohen describes on her father in the old country (Cahan also refers to them as "side-locks"; *Levinsky* 29). Yet even David Levinsky, so pious in his youth—as when he calls his own locks "my two appendages," suggesting that they are as much a part of his body as his arms or legs (71)—looks back on his religious mentor in Russia, Reb Sender, as having a face "flanked by a pair of thick, heavy, dark-brown sidelocks that seemed to weigh him down" (29). Levinsky's choice of words here displays, in his advanced age and in his position as Americanized millionaire, the prevailing new world attitude regarding such 'old-fashioned' accoutrements as thoroughly outmoded and holding one back in the struggle to gain purchase in the American milieu. Indeed, in marking them out as a 'weighing down' his old friend, Levinsky effectively links the possession of earlocks to a burden with the potential to drag a man under in the sink-or-swim New York environment; immersed in such surroundings, side-locks become a danger to one's financial, political and social survival, and Levinsky

intimates that, as a weight literally attached to one's body, they are in direct opposition to the desire to rise to the top of ghetto life and incorporate into the mainstream of American culture. Cahan's creation uses, in his bias, language which evokes a life and death struggle, and in doing so reveals just how immediate and tangible he perceives the threat of retained orthodoxy to be. If cutting one's earlocks and clipping one's beard can win a man the slightest bit of cultural capital in the new world, David Levinsky views the actions as justified.

Given the lengths to which David is willing to go in order to get what he wants in the course of the novel—lengths that include adultery, lying and cheating in business, poaching others' employees, and stealing clothing designs from his competitors—it is no surprise that the sin of shaving fazes him so little. In fact, Levinsky can be seen as a quintessential example of losing one's religion by degrees in America, albeit taken to an extreme as he consistently ignores conscience, visits prostitutes, pursues married women and steals from his competitors. In David's case, Reb Sender's fear that “one becomes a Gentile” in the United States (61) seems to be fairly well-founded as Cahan's protagonist piles sin upon sin in the new world, and the young man's hometown friend, Naphtali—a student of Talmud like Levinsky, albeit one who has decided that he no longer believes in the Lord—echoes Sender's sentiment when he makes a statement concerning the Almighty and answers the young Levinsky's retort of “I thought you did not believe in God” with a pointed question. “How long will *you* believe in Him after you get to America?” he asks, and the answer is a complicated one. Levinsky never denies God, yet he continually acts as if the Lord will not hold him accountable for violating his religious principles and the discrepancy between the persistence of the main character's belief in the Divine and the amorality of his comportment is what makes his actions so shocking.

Despite almost wholly abandoning his religion, Levinsky continues to believe that the Almighty exists and always retains a vestige of his reverence for the Lord, and Cahan's genius is such that this makes his antihero's behavior appear worse in the eyes of the reader than it would have been had he become a complete atheist. However, the extremity of Levinsky's loss of religion is precisely the point of the narrative; as he is converted from the pious religious student of his youth into the selfish salesman and unscrupulous manufacturing-shop owner of his adult life he also undergoes the transformation from greenhorn to respected American businessman, and the radical nature of his apostasy is mirrored by the extremity of his financial metamorphosis. In the course of the novel, David, the destitute *yeshivah* student, becomes Levinsky, the eminent and powerful cloaks-and-suits millionaire, and Cahan uses the two oppositional trajectories—those of his character's religious and professional personas—to illustrate the complex relationship between, if not the mutual exclusivity of, orthodox Judaism and Americanization.

Levinsky's millions come at the cost of abandoning his religion and his roots, and his statement, made in the book's final paragraph, that "[his] past and [his] present do not comport well" is quite accurate (518). "David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer," he claims in the last line of his narration (518), and the vague sense of unease which accompanies his later years is, like that discussed by Yezierska's characters (and by the writer herself after her brief tenure in Hollywood), attributed to the fact that he is unable "to get accustomed to [his] luxurious life" (518). "I am always more or less conscious of my good clothes, of the high quality of my office furniture, of the power I wield over the men in my pay," Levinsky tells the reader, unceasingly aware of how

far he has come and how much of an outsider he is in the company of other rich individuals, and having earlier illustrated his plight by recounting an experience with the head of a mill that supplies his factory with raw materials for the clothing it manufactures. This man, despite having a long-standing and friendly business relationship with Levinsky, declines to treat the latter as an equal and attempts to hide his feelings of superiority behind a façade of good-natured jocularly – a situation, it is implied, that will never change regardless of how much influence David has in the industry or how much wealth he manages to amass. “He addressed me as Dave,” Levinsky recalls, and “there was a note of condescension as well as of admiration in this ‘Dave’ of his. It implied that I was a shrewd fellow and an excellent customer, singularly successful and reliable, but that I was his inferior.” “At the bottom of my heart,” he confesses, “I considered myself his superior, finding an amusing discrepancy between his professorial face and the crudity of his intellectual manners; but he was a Gentile, and an American, and a much wealthier man than I, so I looked up to him” (490). This aside leaves little doubt about how David is viewed in his professional circle. He is “shrewd,” “successful and reliable,” but considered “inferior” because he is “a Jew, a social pariah” (490).

Levinsky’s religion, abandoned so completely in his pursuit of American achievement and social status, seems inextricably linked to his identity—at first by his cloth supplier and his peers within the clothing industry, who refuse to treat him as an equal, and later by even David himself (hence the claim that “the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume . . . seems to have more in common with [his] inner identity than . . . the well-known cloak-manufacturer”)—and it is this situation that Yeziarska and David Roediger agree on as the paradoxical height of many a Jewish immigrant’s aspirations. Early in the text, Levinsky is told of a couple in New York who “are

awfully rich and . . . live like veritable Gentiles, which is a common disease among the Jews of America’” (97), and in addition to the religious implications of such a statement the speaker is also hinting at subtler shades of social interaction. While the couple is rich enough to be admired by other Jews, they have chosen to ignore their past and live in a manner which sets them apart from those looking up to them, and although they live *like* Gentiles it is not said that they live *among* Gentiles, which is a very important distinction. Unable to fully integrate, the top tier of new immigrant society was caught between ‘full-fledged,’ or native-born Americans above and their fellow Jews below, and the religious and cultural trappings they took great pains to shed often became sentimental reminders of past happiness in their lonely and isolated state. Yet—as we will see in Chapter Three—the romanticized visions of the past which haunt them are distortions of the reality that once was, not accurate representations of it; the isolation of their liminal state engenders a desire to return to the atmosphere of community, built on common religion, shared homelands, and group struggles against poverty and oppression, present in their earlier years, but reentering such a community after ‘living like Gentiles’ is impossible. As in Yezierska’s “The Fat of the Land,” individuals who have ‘risen above’ the ghetto lifestyle find little solace in returning to it; the toils, discomforts, dirtiness and hunger that are left out of their fond, yet ultimately idealized recollections of the past grate on them more acutely than before and, having tasted an existence without such worries, make reliving the ‘happy’ days of one’s youth all but impossible. Levinsky recognizes this conundrum in retrospect, even succumbing, at times, to maudlin sentimentality himself, but it is doubtful that he could communicate the emotional and psychological costs of his prior pursuits to other immigrants even if he tried. As occurs when the future millionaire first arrives in America and adopts a Jew “literally

aglow with diamonds” as “a source of living encouragement” (Cahan *Levinsky* 90), his interlocutors would most likely see the outward appearance of the limited power, influence and wealth in his possession as the pinnacle of American achievement and ignore his warnings about forsaking their culture, in effect becoming mesmerized by the financial promise he embodies for them while feigning deafness regarding the misery inherent in such a position.

Indeed, exemplifying the rosy view of the past adopted by many successful Jews after making enough money to leave the ghetto, even the opportunity to have revenge on “Shmerl the Pincher,” one of David’s teachers in Russia who earned his nickname by viciously abusing his students, offers Levinsky no solace as his nostalgia for the religious life of his youth thwarts the attempt. Despite the instructor having “been one of the most heartless” of Levinsky’s “tormentors” (491), and in spite of young David’s dreams of “becoming a rich and influential man and wreaking vengeance upon [his] brutal teachers,” when he sees the elderly, enfeebled man peddling on the street in New York he becomes “greatly excited” and his first emotional response is “a keen desire to help him.” But Levinsky, torn between two worlds, can neither revenge himself upon Shmerl, as his American self, so long obsessed with victory and upward mobility, wishes to do, nor can he help the old man from his hometown as his lingering Jewish self prefers. The millionaire’s Americanized side asks “why court trouble? Leave him alone,” and as quickly as it has come, Levinsky tells us, “[his] exaltation [is] gone. The spell [is] broken” (491). As evidenced by his decision to abstain from pursuing retributive action against his erstwhile ‘torturer,’ the protagonist’s response to the situation is due to ambivalence rather than antipathy, which reveals the complicated nature of his relationship with the past, with the result that he is crippled by indecision long enough for the

benevolent impulse to subside. Unable to shake the guilt he feels at ignoring the man, however, David recounts that, “by way of defending [him]self before [his] conscience, [he] tried to think of the unmerited beatings [Shmerl] used to give [him]. But it was of no avail” (491-492). “The idea of avenging myself on this decrepit, tattered old peddler . . . made me feel small,” he writes. “I was conscious of a desire to go back and to try to overtake him; but I did not. The desire was a meandering, sluggish sort of feeling. The spell was broken irretrievably” (492). Thus conflicted, Levinsky elucidates his inability to exist, completely, in either of the two worlds he represents and, saliently, his discourse passively communicates another instance of lost religion to the reader. It seems that even Shmerl the Pincher has left his orthodoxy behind in Russia: he is peddling in America rather than plying his trade as a religious teacher.

The manner in which it is presented notwithstanding, Shmerl’s new occupation is not terribly surprising for the reader as in the realm of early-twentieth century immigrant fiction such circumstances are depicted with such regularity as to seem commonplace, if not ubiquitous. Indeed, in the world of Cahan’s and Yezierska’s novels such transformations are addressed so frequently, and, in the cases of their main characters, in such depth, that they become the central theme of nearly their entire literary output and the hinge upon which the majority of their narratives turn. But Shmerl’s forfeiture of his old world trade is also indicative of a larger shift in the Jewish tutorial paradigm which shapes the educational landscape of Cahan’s entire body of work; for, as we will see in Chapter Three, as religious instruction fell out of favor in the new world, the idol of secular education rapidly rose to take its place as the academic mode of choice for new immigrants aspiring to transcend the occupational limitations of the ghetto. This fundamental shift in Jewish educational tropes, which saw a widespread and definitive move away from pursuing religious

studies at the turn of the century, was hastened by the fact that many children were sent to work from an early age in order to earn money for their families, receiving little to no formal education as a result, or were sent to local public schools in order to learn English and make observations about American culture which they could then relate to the rest of the household. Levinsky, for example, describes how Lucy Margolis, his friend Max's daughter, quizzes her mother, Dora, on English words and spelling in Levinsky's company one evening, with Max bragging that "'Lucy is the only teacher [Dora] ever had'" (*Levinsky* 219), and although the decision to send their children to American educational institutions for instruction rather than to learned religious men like Shmerl was a practical one for immigrants—such a decision helped *oysgreen* the entire family by furthering their linguistic assimilation—it is also indicative of larger issues surrounding Jewish religious abandonment. Men like "Shmerl the Pincher," so revered in the Pale of Settlement, found their brand of education undesirable in the United States and had to resort to other jobs in order to make ends meet – and as they turned away from tutoring their neighbors' children it became increasingly difficult for subsequent groups of immigrants to find reliable religious instruction in their adopted land, leaving them few options for educating their offspring other than enrolling them in the secular and Protestant parochial schools offered by local government and private charities. In short, the U.S. offered little practical infrastructure for religious Jews in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and the infrastructure realized by Jews, for Jews, was frequently disregarded in favor of the American alternative as such Jewish infrastructure was seen as hindering rapid and thorough acculturation. If an individual's adherence to religious strictures was worn away by degrees in the new world, breaking such rules was often a matter of survival in a society that did not share the ideas about education,

language, dress, food, transportation, cleanliness and commerce held common by Jews in the shtetls from whence they had come.

Take, for example, Rose Cohen's father, who horrifies his daughter in New York by handling money on the Sabbath while buying her a piece of fruit. Although he has the option of buying kosher food on the Lower East Side, which he and his daughter do on a regular basis, he does not have the option of paying at a later date or bartering in kind as he did in Russia. In the shtetl, if a family required something on a Saturday the owner of the shop or farm would 'trust' them the goods – that is, allow them to take items on faith of repayment later so as not to sin by accepting compensation, and thereby conducting a financial transaction, on the Sabbath. However, commerce being much different in the United States—and having an infrastructure which does not cater to orthodox Judaism—Cohen's father is not 'trusted' for her piece of fruit. After witnessing this scenario, Cohen recalls that she "felt the blood rush to [her] face. [She] stood staring at him for a moment. Then [she] dropped the melon on the pavement and ran" (78). "'My father has touched coin on the Sabbath!'" she weeps as she flees down the street; "'father carries money with him on the Sabbath. Oh, the sin! Oh, poor grandmother,'" she laments (78), "'how would she feel if she knew[?]" Rahel's shame calls to mind the rest of the Gollup family, still 'back home' in Russia, and she wonders how they would react to her father's sinfully American action. Thinking specifically of her brother, who is "'so pious that he wishes to remain with a learned Jew in Russia, after mother goes to America, that he may become a great Rabbi'" (79) (the same younger brother, ironically, who demands "'American' shoes" in order to fit in in New York City and throws his old pair off of a rooftop to force his parents' hand in the matter), Rose wonders "'how would he feel? How would they all feel?'" Not long after this event,

however, Gollup watches a girl go out to buy candy on a Saturday and recalls that “seeing money handled on Sabbath had long lost its horror for me” (94). In fact, Rahel goes even further than this by saying “it occurred to [her] that [she] too would like to have a cent with which to do just as [she] please[s]” (94) and she asks her father for money with which to go out and purchase a treat, which illustrates just how much, and how quickly, her morals have changed since arriving at Castle Garden.

Echoing the religious and social implications of such a shift in attitude, Cahan illustrates another, similar instance in *Yekl* which involves the titular character and his wife, Gitl, after the former meets the latter and their young son at Ellis Island on a Saturday morning. In the novella, Yekl Podkovnik has spent several years living in Boston and New York City and, although he has not completely acculturated, he has adopted a very liberal attitude toward that procedure and is desirous of such Americanization as is realistically available to him. After putting it off for some time while enjoying the freedom available in his new country, Yekl, now known by the thoroughly westernized moniker of ‘Jake,’ sends for his family in Povodye,¹⁵ and after an awkward reunion in immigration he leads them to a “horse car” outside (*Yekl* 37). It is bad enough that Jake arrives at the gangplank “smartly dressed in his best clothes and ball shoes” (being a man who, in his wife’s absence, has enjoyed the American pastime of dancing) and “freshly shaven and clipped”—the sight of which causes Gitl some dismay, which she later voices by wailing “‘*Oi* a lamentation upon me! He shaves his beard!’” (35)—and compels her change out of her Sabbath wig, the mark of a traditional Jewish woman’s piety on the holy day, in the concourse, and the thought of her husband hiring a car sends Gitl over the edge. “‘*Oi* woe is me! Why, it is the Sabbath!’” she gasps (37), and Jake is thoroughly embarrassed by her

¹⁵ “a fictional town in ‘Northwestern Russia’ that is probably based on Cahan’s Podberezy” (Chura para. 9), the latter of which Chura also refers to as “Paberžė” (para. 5)

outburst, which he considers a consummately greenhornish display of old-fashioned religious devotion. “He irately essay[s] to explain,” Cahan writes, “that a car, being an uncommon sort of vehicle, . . . implie[s] no violation of the holy day. But this she sturdily [meets] by reference to railroads” (37). Gitl knows that “no orthodox Jew [will] use [horse cars] on the seventh day” but “Jake, losing all self-control, fiercely command[s] her not to make him [a] laughingstock . . . and to get in without further ado” (38). “Completely dismayed by his stern manner” and the “strange, uproarious, forbidding surroundings, Gitl yield[s],” but “she utter[s] a groan of consternation,” looks “aghast” and nurses “a violently throbbing heart” as the horses begin to move, Cahan adding that “if she had been a culprit on the way to the gallows she could not have been more terrified than she [is] now at this[,] her first ride on the day of rest” (38). The experience of meeting her husband in New York overwhelms the new arrival, and as Jake yells at the conductor over their fares “so great [is] the impression which his dashing manner and . . . English produce[s] on Gitl, that for some time it relieve[s] her mind and she even for[gets] to be shocked by the sight of her husband handling coin on the Sabbath” (38). Jake’s wife is not spared the immediacy of ‘sinful’ financial transactions in the manner that Rose Cohen is shielded from them, for a time, by her father—the latter woman is a child when she emigrates and is thus slower to notice the commercial situation present in her new surroundings—and the drama inherent in the Podkovniks situation is heightened by Cahan’s decision to set the scene on a Saturday. Had the proceedings occurred on a weekday, she would have been stunned by Jake’s clean-shaven face and unabashedly American mien but paying to commute on the horse-drawn tram would not have been an issue; conversely, by specifying a Sabbath landfall Cahan sets up an idealistic collision for the couple which immerses Gitl Podkovnik in several aspects of the sinful (i.e.,

unaccommodating of Jewish orthodoxy) American morass and its unforgiving infrastructure in one fell swoop rather than exposing her to them over time. That being the case, the sight of her spouse handling money to pay the conductor does not concern her as she reels from the shock of seeing her husband's Americanized form and manner.

Rose Cohen's narrative, in which she is always frank about her religion and the impact that Americanization has on her family, illustrates this situation time and time again. After coming home from a grueling day at the shop and cooking dinner for herself and her father, for instance, Gollup would often be so exhausted that she would "tumble right in" to bed on her little cot and "roll [herself] in the red comforter, clothes and all," falling asleep as soon as she lay down (115). "It was on these nights," she confides, "that I began to forget to pray." This short statement—as bold as it is matter-of-fact—is extremely important as it illustrates the toll that daily life in America took on the religious practices of working-class immigrants. Men were forced to abandon their religious studies in favor of working long, arduous hours to support their families, and their children often suffered a similar fate. "How will mother like America?" Cohen wonders (143); "will she be shocked at father's and my impiety?" "For I too was not so pious now," she admits, confessing, pointedly, that after her tenure laboring in United States she "still performed some of the little religious rites assigned to a girl, but mechanically, not with the ever-present consciousness of God" (143). "There were moments of deep devotion," Gollup claims, "but they were rare." Rose's candor here illuminates the plight of many Jewish-American immigrants, and she follows this statement with another, equally poignant one. "Sometimes when I thought of it I felt sad," she recalls; "I felt as if I had lost something precious" (143). In another example, Rose recalls her family's

neighbor in Russia, Yanna, “who, on hearing that father was in America, and feeling perhaps that we were too happy over it, came over one day to torment grandmother” (79).

“The first thing men do in America,” she had said, “is cut their beards and the first thing women do is leave off their wigs. And you,” she had said, turning to me venomously, “you who will not break a thread on the Sabbath now, will eat swine in America.” (79)

““Oh, God,”” Gollup thinks, ““will it really come to that? shall I eat swine?”” – and although her neighbor’s prediction is obviously tainted with jealousy, it is not far from the truth. Yanna’s assertion that men cut their beards shortly after arriving in America was frequently true, as we have seen, as is her claim that many Jewish women forwent wearing wigs in the new world, and though Rahel does not eat pork, she does eat *trafe*, or unclean, meat during the many month-long stays in the hospital brought on by her anemia.

Due to her circumstances, Rose’s consumption of ‘unclean’ meat is inevitable. The scarcity of Jewish infrastructure in the United States meant that hospitals offered little food which conformed to orthodox standards for preparation and cleanliness, and the only alternative to eating meals prepared by Gentile staff members in a Christian facility is, given the length of her stays, starvation. Even Cohen’s mother, who is decidedly more old-fashioned than Rose herself, encourages her daughter to partake of the unkosher fare provided by her benefactors, stating that she “must eat everything and get strong” (236). ““You are not here for pleasure,”” she says; ““take it as you would a medicine”” (236). Despite the girl’s adamant resistance to such a sin—““no, I shall not eat swine,”” Rahel tearfully tells herself after arriving in New York, whereupon she observes her father’s changed attitude toward actions previously considered sinful, ““indeed I shall not!”” (80)—she has no other option under the

circumstances. Although she is not forced to eat pork in the hospital (pork being the “swine” of which she speaks), the meat she does ingest there fails to conform to the strict guidelines set for her by her religion, and for many American Jews this would have been a familiar story. With no real value placed on diversity in the United States—Gordon Wood, for example, “perhaps the foremost student of the Revolutionary generation’s republicanism” (Jacobson *Whiteness* 26), maintains that the country was founded under the belief that the “public good” (Wood 55) depends on maintaining a “homogeneous” polity “whose ‘interests[,] when candidly considered[,] are one’” (58)—institutions did not cater to different ethnic groups’ varying ideas of what is and is not acceptable in terms of diet, cleanliness, prayer and personal interaction, and if one were so unfortunate as to land in a hospital or other charity, as was Gollup, necessity dictated transgressing against such rules as would have previously been immutable and absolute. As with Rahel Gollup’s father, if continuously witnessed and participated in such transgressions lose their horror over time and eventually become the norm. There were no multilayered or hyphenated definitions of race and ethnicity in contemporary U.S. culture, and unless one was willing to comply with the one pervasive definition of ‘White America’—a delineation with no place for kosher cooking and earlocks among its ranks—one would forever be relegated to the dark white minority living outside the mainstream. The theme of food being a stumbling block for pious Jews is mentioned again as Cohen’s younger siblings are tempted at school as well, and their mother reluctantly tells her hungry children that they “can bow [their] head[s] and pray” (162) when she learns that the students in their classes (which are “connected with a [Christian] church or a missionary society”; 160) receive bread and honey when they “repeat [a] prayer after the teacher” (160). What begins here, like Rahel’s hospital stays, as an

isolated incident, born out of need and permitted as a last resort, slowly becomes acceptable in everyday life as the family adapts to American attitudes. In Russia, Gollup's mother would never have allowed her children to repeat a Christian missionary's prayer in exchange for food, and again we observe the intense pressure to homogenize that so defined the era's sociopolitical landscape. As we will see in the subsequent chapter, this pressure was frequently couched in rhetoric of assistance and resulted, when implemented in an institutional form, in backhanded 'charity' designed to efface overt ethnic and cultural difference while reinforcing the economic stratification of a U.S. polity which thrived on social exclusion. Whether or not acceptance by 'White America' was realistically attainable for Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is moot; the fact remains that without bending, or outright breaking, some of the most sacred of Jewish laws, one couldn't even foster the *hope* of trying to integrate.

CHAPTER TWO

“‘[None] Too Poor to Help’”:¹⁶

Shtetl Charity, U.S. Philanthropy and the Americanization Movement

As we have seen, the changes in religion that began to occur for many Jewish immigrants upon arrival in the new world affected numerous aspects of daily life, and this included reshaping many of their ideas about charity and charitable giving. In eastern Europe, Jewish families were responsible for helping others on an individual basis by offering goods, food, and shelter to those in need, and neighbors often banded together to help members of their community who were sick, widowed or elderly, or who required ongoing care due to circumstances outside of their own control. In her introduction to Anzia Yezierska's *Arrogant Beggar*, Katherine Stubbs contends that such actions were considered equitable rather than generous: "according to the anthropologists Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog," she writes,

in the close-knit shtetls of Eastern Europe there was a great emphasis on *tsdokeh*, a Hebrew word that can be translated as "social justice."¹⁷ The ideology behind *tsdokeh* dictated that beneficent giving not be regarded as charity but as simple fairness. *Tsdokeh* encompassed all forms of charitable giving (material gifts as well as good deeds), and was expected of each member of the community at all stages of life, according to his or her resources. (xxix)

In addition, Stubbs reports, "the highest form of *tsdokeh* was that which was given with kindness" and, "although it was admittedly greater to give than to receive (those

¹⁶ Yezierska *Bread Givers* 90

¹⁷ Zborowski & Herzog 193

who gave gained prestige on earth and honor in heaven), the charity recipient was to be spared humiliation” (xxix). As such, “gifts would be called loans (although there was no expectation that they would be repaid), and secret gifts or gifts that were anonymous were considered the best kinds of charity, for the giver was kind enough not to advertise the giving” (xxix). Recognizing the emphasis on altruistic giving as ““social justice”” (Zborowski & Herzog 193) or “fairness” (Stubbs Introduction xxix) and acknowledging the fact that “the . . . recipient [is] to be spared humiliation” (xxix) are critical to understanding the Jewish conception of charity; according to *tsdokeh* “those who [are] impoverished ha[ve] the right to ask for assistance, and Jews who [are] wealthy [are] under obligation to help” “those who are weaker, poorer, more ignorant, younger, or sicker” than themselves (xxix; Zborowski & Herzog 195). For individuals raised in traditional Jewish villages, such sharing and caretaking of others would have been both a way of life and a religious imperative—Robert Rockaway, for example, to illustrate the compulsory nature of such actions, writes that “since Biblical times, Jewish law and tradition has mandated that the more fortunate members of the community must assist their less fortunate brethren” (*Words of the Uprooted* 118)—and families gave according to their own stock of supplies, bestowing gifts directly on the recipient in question rather than giving to a charitable institution which would then distribute goods and services to the needy. Indeed, such intermediary organizations were largely unknown in the Pale of Settlement, which, as we will see, set the stage for profound misunderstandings in the United States, where they were becoming increasingly commonplace as a result of urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and the Americanization movement.

Rose Cohen gives an example of the personal, individual style of charity which pervaded the shtetl by recounting, in the first chapter of her autobiography, the way

her family would act when taking in a traveling beggar for the night. The Gollups, despite having little food and comfort themselves, happily share what is theirs on such occasions; “mother would put on a fresh apron and begin to prepare something extra for supper,” Cohen remembers (10), and her blind, elderly grandmother’s “pale face, so indifferent a minute before, would light up as if with new life” at the prospect of welcoming someone into their home (10). “At bedtime, grandfather would give up his favorite bed, the bench near the oven, to the stranger,” she writes, and “mother would give him the largest and softest of her pillows” (11). In the morning, Rose’s grandmother, who “always sat in bed knitting a stocking” (10), would “give him a clean pair of socks to put on” for the rest of his journey (11), and Cohen comments, rather nostalgically, on the “boundless” “joy” and “holiday spirit” which pervaded the home while they accommodated their visitor (10). Noteworthy, too, is the fact that she includes the description of these events very near the beginning of her chronicle, for by placing this recollection in the first few pages of her autobiography the author identifies such occurrences as some of the earliest and most vivid of her childhood memories while also making them seem an important, even integral, part of her life in Europe. However, whereas such hospitality for beggars was standard practice among Jews in the old world (Cohen implies that similar incidents occurred often and were among the highlights of her younger years), in the new world, and in New York in particular, a different practice of philanthropy was developing which called for more “efficient, practical, modern, and scientific methods of dispensing aid” (Rockaway *Words* 10).

In *Words of the Uprooted: Jewish Immigrants in Early 20th Century America*, Robert Rockaway describes the American penchant for organizing charitable giving into bureaucratic institutions by using the Industrial Removal Office, which facilitated

the relocation of skilled and semi-skilled Jewish workers from New York City to communities across the United States, to illustrate how the charitable process began to include offices full of middle-men that removed the giver from the recipient, created administrative agencies funded by affluent individuals, and endeavored to use ‘efficient’ means to disperse money and aid to those less fortunate than themselves. The Industrial Removal Office, or IRO, in an effort to alleviate the congestion and negative stereotypes typically associated with the Lower East Side, and to keep such stereotypes from tarnishing the collective reputation of acculturated ‘uptown’ Jews, established a network of local councils across the country which acted as extensions of the head office in New York—home of the era’s busiest immigration checkpoints—and which effectively created a nationwide institutional framework for disseminating Jews across the American mid-west, west and south. Such a diaspora was deemed preferable to having newly-arrived immigrants congregating with their fellows at their first port of call, the IRO’s progenitors believing that the continued settlement of eastern European Jews in New York City would increase feelings of anti-Semitism on the eastern seaboard, and to enable their program of relocation the IRO engaged both volunteers and paid social workers. At its height, the organization employed a number of full time office staff at its headquarters and, depending on the size of the town and the frequency with which the institution would send workers to its jurisdiction, would utilize full-time, part-time or volunteer labor in the field; IRO offices in larger cities would have a salaried, full-time employee attached to them as well as retaining the services of several Jewish community leaders—usually local businessmen—who would assist in receiving and acclimating new arrivals, while smaller towns would employ either part-time assistants or make use solely of volunteers, though some ‘volunteers’ received monthly stipends if they committed a

significant amount of time and effort to the project. These employees, volunteers, and community heads sat together on the IRO's 'local councils' and served as the organization's eyes and ears in a given city, helping to secure jobs and financial support for new arrivals as well as providing them with advice on local customs and amenities, and collected data on regional job markets, housing prospects and costs of living for the head office's archives.

Although the Industrial Removal Office's network of local councils was set up to help Jews in need find employment and escape the poverty, ill-health and congestion of city life, the IRO's processes, a number of which were born out of necessity in prosecuting the operation of a national aid-dispensing entity, were both abhorrent and antithetical to the religious, community-based charitable sensibilities of those individuals and familial groups whom the organization sought to assist. Rockaway describes the rise of "scientific charity" (*Words* 10) within the American Jewish community as being, in part, a response to the stresses placed on their organizations by the enormous influx of immigrants and the sheer number of families applying for aid on the east coast. One of the most prominent aid associations in New York City, for example, the United Jewish Charities, "unable to cope" with such demands, "faced insolvency" prior to 1900 (11), and in the face of such a predicament, Rockaway asserts, "it became obvious that a more systematic approach was needed." As such, the trustees of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, endowed by the Munich-born Jewish-American community leader Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896) and used to fund the IRO's creation, sought to institute processes that effectively distributed aid to those in need while preserving the idealistic integrity (and, perhaps more importantly, the continued financial viability) of its institutions, with the result that while most of the IRO's employees—including director David Bressler—possessed

honorable intentions and expressed legitimate concern for the happiness and wellbeing of the immigrants with whom they interacted, they often inadvertently degraded the recipients of their assistance with what the latter considered a very sterile and clinical way of dealing with recent arrivals. Nor was the IRO alone in receiving such indictments, as contemporary critics “fear[ed] that [the country’s] . . . reform movements” were “retarded by [a] failure to take . . . people into [their] confidence and make them participants rather than [the] laboratory specimens of . . . social experiments” (Aronovici 722). In addition to what many new immigrants viewed as a general air of suspicion and the accusatory tone of their would-be benefactors, there was also the matter of the investigations, examinations and interviews associated with the disbursement of aid in the United States. Originally put in place to ascertain the ‘worthiness’ of the applicant and ensure efficient distribution of an organization’s funds (Bressler claims, for instance, in a letter to a field agent arguing for reimbursement, that the IRO’s monies “are entrusted to me and it is my duty to see that they are judiciously expended”; Rockaway *Words* 91), these administrative meetings were offensive because, as Rockaway reports,

the eastern Europeans came from a milieu where these practices did not exist. . . . The principle of investigation was alien to their philosophy and repugnant to their sensibilities. The record- and account-keeping system of American agencies impressed them as being a cold and thoroughly un-Jewish principle in action. (10)

He goes on to state that “while the immigrants appreciated the aid they received, their gratefulness was often tinged with resentment at the manner in which the charity was dispensed” (10). As one woman, a Mrs. Samuel Friedman, put it in a letter to Bressler which both thanked him for his “kind favor” in providing financial assistance and admonished him for humiliating her by asking why she did not pawn her jewelry or

“borrow of friends” instead of applying to the IRO (142), “you should not think everyone that comes into the office to ask for aid must be a cheat, a liar and ignorant. Some may be such,” she admits, “but there are exceptions and a man like [Bressler] ought to know the difference” (143). According to Rockaway, who presents an introduction to their correspondence as well as reprinting the letters themselves, “Bressler considered his questions, intended to ascertain the financial status of the applicant, a necessary formality before granting a loan. Mrs. Friedman, however, saw them as humiliating and demeaning” and “resented Bressler’s attitude toward her when she applied for assistance” (142). Such misunderstandings meant that upon arriving in America help often changed from what an immigrant perceived as being the extension of a warm and compassionate offer of assistance, such as Cahan describes in Levinsky’s early days with his widowed mother in Russia (12), to an embarrassing, almost violatory experience filled with condescending intrusions – a change that Anzia Yezierska, in her fiction, took great pains to illuminate.

Yezierska illustrates the complicated and frequently fraught relationship between European immigrants and American charities often in her work and, according to *Hungry Hearts* (1920), *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), individuals were often no longer as thankful for receiving aid as they were indignant at the process to which they were subjected in order to acquire it. From the erroneously appellated “friendly visitor” sent to investigate Shmendrik in *Hungry Hearts*’ “My Own People” (243) and the rigidity and regulations of the titular retreat in that same volume’s “The Free Vacation House” to the characters of Miss Ward and Mrs. Olney, John Manning and the Hellmans in *Children of Loneliness*’s “A Bed for the Night,” *Salome of the Tenements* and *Arrogant Beggar*, respectively (and the depictions of settlement homes in all three of these texts), the author’s

narratives are consistently imbued with “trenchant critique[s] of the assimilationist and philanthropic ideologies of Progressive America” (Konzett 7). Using the presence of these “trenchant critique[s]” as a foil, Yezierska emphasizes the positive emotional effects individual charity has on the recipient and explores dimensions of giving in which motives are subordinate to action. In *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), for example, Adele Lindner, having succumbed to disillusion while living in the ‘progressive’ Hellman Home for Working Girls, returns to the ghetto and experiences true charity in the form of Muhmenkeh, an elderly Jewish woman who takes her in, gives her lodging and cares for her health. When the two first meet over the dishwashing sink at a cheap diner, Adele, ruminating on her fall from Mrs. Hellman’s fine Fifth Avenue dining room to her current position at a “Second Avenue hash joint” (92), is initially repulsed by her coworker’s aged, threadbare appearance. “What a worn-out old face!” she exclaims (93). “The shrunken, toothless mouth. Wrinkles knotting into wrinkles. Old enough for the grave.” “I couldn’t bear to have her touch me.” And yet, despite the young woman’s protests, upon hearing that Adele has nowhere to stay that night Muhmenkeh’s “shaking hand reache[s] for her rusty old coat” and suddenly, the protagonist reports, “this impossible old creature was hauling me away as if she had always known me” (93). After affording the young woman a place to live, washing her laundry and providing her with food, Muhmenkeh uses her meager savings to nurse Lindner back to health when the latter falls ill—savings, it is revealed, that were meant to fund her granddaughter’s passage to America—and it is at this point that Adele, and the reader, begins to understand the full extent of the sacrifices the immigrant is willing to make in order to help a near-total stranger. Nor is this the first time the generous old woman has cared for someone else’s health: according to one Dr. Sirowich, who visits Adele in

Muhmenkeh's basement flat, the girl's caretaker is "the best nurse on the East Side" (107). "We've worked together on some pretty tough cases" he declares while giving her "cheek a loving little pinch" (107). The elderly woman, with her history of putting the needs of others before her own and asking nothing in return, is the embodiment of true human charity, and over time she tempers the cynicism and bitter disillusion which grip Adele due to her treatment at the hands of the more organized, yet, ironically, ill-run institution of the American settlement home.

Both Adele's initial revulsion and Muhmenkeh's selfless nature serve as counterpoint to her experiences with the Hellmans, to whose beauty, poise and status she is initially drawn before realizing that both mother and son are using their namesake Hellman Home for Working Girls in a backhanded and self-serving manner. Mrs. Hellman is, in fact, using the organization to teach 'working girls' that "there are no menial tasks if you bring to your work the spirit of service and the love of honest toil" (46), a sentiment which, while sounding rather lofty, is meant to teach them their place in the American economic hierarchy and, according to their benefactor, ensure "the harmony and perfection of the whole universe" by reinforcing existing class structures and perpetuating the socially stratified status quo (46) (she even, at one point, employs Adele in her own home for below the going rate in order to exploit cheap labor under the auspices of giving the young woman work experience as a personal favor; 61-69). Similarly, though without the level of smug arrogance exuded by his mother, Arthur, previously idolized by Adele, is latterly exposed as playing at philanthropic and artistic patronage for personal renown rather than acting out of a genuine desire to ease the plight of the poor whom he patronizes. While Mrs. Hellman espouses, but does not embody, the exhortation that "the joy of living consists [of] serving others" (46), Muhmenkeh is quite the opposite; she

exemplifies, but does not espouse, “‘the joy of living’” brought on by truly selfless giving (Adele, wondering about the woman’s past, in fact, imagines her unspoken philosophy to be that “giving [is] really living—the only living. If you [don]’t give, you [don]’t live”; 120) while the rich benefactors of the Home fail to understand or experience such felicity. “‘Not every day falls on me the pleasure—a young girl for my guest,’” the frail but lively Jew exclaims in Yeziarska’s typical blend of Yiddish and English dialogue,¹⁸ her face breaking “into a million wrinkles of a smile” (95), and the reader is left with the distinct impression that Muhmenkeh views Linder’s presence—and the opportunity to serve her—as a treat rather than a burden.

Furthering the woman’s image as the archetypal charitable neighbor, the actions Muhmenkeh takes in befriending Adele cast the former in a new light, effectively transforming her though no physical alteration of her being occurs in the course of the narrative: for although the immigrant, who had originally disgusted Linder, experiences no outward change, the satisfaction of welcoming someone in need into her home transfigures her, which echoes Rose Cohen’s description of her grandmother as the Gollup family does the same for an indigent traveler. “Everything about [Muhmenkeh is] as gray as the suds in the washtub,” Lindner observes,

gray skin, gray stringy hair, gray rags. It seem[s] to [Adele that] nothing on earth could be as terrible as to grow so old and bent. And yet [Muhmenkeh can] smile like that. Smile and receive [her] with [the] warm, rich friendliness of a person who feels she has much to give.” (95)

Muhmenkeh’s “gnarled . . . skeleton hand,” in direct opposition to Mrs. Hellman’s, has “the power to keep on giving and serving” (119), and it is this love of others that,

¹⁸ Saliently, in *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism*, Joshua Miller writes that “U.S. modernists” “engaged in in novelistic acts of linguistic reposition[ing] . . . by infusing English with the words and rhythms of non-English and ‘nonstandard’ languages as U.S. speech” (25). For an excellent discussion of “translating ‘Englitch’” (227) and Yiddish in Jewish-American texts, see Miller 227-270.

in the context of the novel, marks the woman as being truly alive. Nor is such generosity a religious affectation, though it imbues her with a heavenly, spiritual glow, as Adele states that “she had not the religiousness of the old Jewish women of the ghetto. No wig. No Sabbath Candles. No praying in synagogues. But that light—don’t people run to churches and synagogues looking for it?” (121). Indeed, illustrating how much she honors her guest, and once again evoking Cohen’s recollection of the holiday spirit occasioned by taking a stranger into the home, Muhmenkeh proffers only the very best of what she has to offer to her new companion: to clean herself in the morning, for instance, Lindner is given the “Sabbath towel,” washed and ironed and, although being “as old as the old woman herself” (94), reserved for only the most special of circumstances. This offer, in conjunction with the observation that Muhmenkeh does not pray in synagogues or light Sabbath candles, alludes to the importance of her charity as the use of the Sabbath towel, which was saved, traditionally, exclusively for holy days, signifies that caring for Adele, whom she has only just met, is more important to her than prayer, rabbinical teachings, or the strict observation of religious rites in the home. It becomes for the reader, in fact, in lieu of any other overtly pious action, the whole of the woman’s religion. Thanks to her caretaker’s selfless manner, Adele feels that there is something “like a bond of blood” between them (97)—a sentiment apparently shared by Muhmenkeh, who likens the young woman to her grandchild—and in Muhmenkeh’s presence “there flow[s] over [Lindner] a sense of peace, of homecoming” (97). “Here [is] the real world I [know],” she exposit, and, given the tone and subject matter of the rest of the novel, as well as Muhmenkeh’s warm and welcoming manner, one assumes that she is not referring merely to her tenement house surroundings.

The marked contrast between Muhmenkeh, the poor Jewish ghetto woman, and the rich, ‘uptown’ and thoroughly American Hellmans allows Yezierska to examine the differences in their charitable actions in a unique fashion, but it is by no means the only such contrast presented in her work. In a juxtaposition similar to that present in *Arrogant Beggar*, Jacque Hollins, a famous *couturier* for the Fifth Avenue elite in *Salome of the Tenements*, claims an almost religious salvation when he assists Sonya Vrunsky, a poor Jew, by providing her with an individually tailored outfit free of charge. “You’ve given me back my lost soul,” he tells the young woman in a transport of ecstasy (27), and when Sonya, despairing of pairing such a fine frock with her coarse, shabby accessories, discovers in the dressing room “undergarments and every detail of the toilette laid out on the dresser—obviously for her—even shoes and silk stockings,” the narration pointedly announces that “the understanding, the delicacy of this big-hearted giving mark[s] Hollins as being above the oppressive charity [which Vrunsky] had known as a child” (27). To fully grasp the importance of these lines, three points bear emphasizing. First of all, the designer has no ulterior motives in providing for the young woman. Hollins does not supply Sonya with one of his fashionable, expensive creations to procure something in return; he is enthralled by Vrunsky and designing the dress is an exercise in sheer benevolence, the art of his creation, the act of giving, and the fulfillment of Sonya’s desire all being their own reward. Secondly, Hollins, before saving enough money to study his craft in Paris, was Jaky Solomon, a poor ghetto Jew like Sonya Vrunsky. Hollins’ giving is therefore grounded in eastern European Jewish tradition, the modes of which stipulated sharing within the community and providing for those in need rather than organizing a charitable movement responsible for ‘uplifting’ an entire stratum of people. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Sonya has grown up in the United

States, so “the oppressive charity she . . . [knew] as a child” is, saliently, that of the American institutional variety. Sonya’s subsequent work with, seduction of, and marriage to millionaire philanthropist John Manning may overshadow this scene in criticizing what Konzett dubs “the assimilationist and philanthropic ideologies of Progressive America” (7), but the exchanges between Vrunsky and Hollins lend depth to the author’s argument and render Manning’s narrow-minded and ultimately dubious charitable paradigm—as well as the dissolution of his and Sonya’s marriage—more poignant by comparison. *Salome* also, as we will see in Chapter Four, explores the ramifications of industrialized consumerism and attempts to redefine the character of American citizenship, but Manning’s status as a rich philanthropist ensures that the socioeconomic and political aspects of these dialogues remain inextricably linked to the stratification of classes perpetuated, to a degree, by the condescension of western charitable institutions.

The complex, humiliating, and often adversarial relationship between benefactor and beneficiary that Yezierska describes as being part and parcel to the American system of charity is exemplified in the real world by Rose Cohen’s recollection of an event which took place during her ongoing treatment for anemia as a teenager.¹⁹ Having been informed by a doctor that she is to convalesce in the country at “White Birch Farm” (260), the girl is given a half dollar with which to pay for her passage to New York City’s Grand Central Station, wherefrom she will continue to her final destination, but Cohen is embarrassed and dumbfounded by the man’s generosity despite his “cheerful[,] kind manner” (260). In Europe, where such

¹⁹ It is unsurprising that parallels exist in these author’s texts as, in addition to being contemporaries drawing inspiration from the same cultural milieu, Louise Henriksen claims that her mother “felt a close connection” with Cohen, whose autobiography “arous[ed] Anzia’s admiration and envy” (Preface *x*). The protagonist of Yezierska’s “Wild Winter Love,” whose struggles as a writer alienate her from her family and lead, eventually, to suicide, is based on Cohen (Henriksen Preface *x*; Krut *xiv*), who attempted suicide in September of 1922 (Dublin *xv*), and “with whom [Yezierska] clearly felt deep empathy” (Krut *xiv*).

assistance was offered by neighbors and kinsmen, it might have been viewed differently, but in America, where it was meted out in the offices of organized institutions, it was cause for shame. Rose is thus prey to a conflict between necessity and pride, and she is unable, ultimately, to do anything but accept the money with mute resignation. When the coin is pressed into the girl's hand, she is overcome with a kind of stupor, and she claims, in retrospect, that she "neither saw nor heard and scarcely knew how [she] left the building. When I was outside," she confides,

I stood still. In my hand was the half dollar, the first direct gift of charity to myself. My face burned. "I can refuse it," I thought. "I can take it right back—but then, I must refuse everything else, the help, the going away"—and going away had become a necessity. (260)

Although Rose has received assistance before, in the form of free doctor's visits and prolonged hospital stays (the "going away" to which she refers, by now a "necessity" due to their virtue as a temporary sojourn away from the dirt and hunger of the crowded, clamorous ghetto), she feels shocked and degraded by her first direct receipt of money as a charitable gift. Her role as a beneficiary of the American charitable system is tinged with indignation as she is simultaneously dependant on aid for her recovery and too proud to accept such assistance in a wholly appreciative manner – a position which led many Jews to harbor feelings of guilt, resentment, and even anger toward the philanthropic bodies which sought to help them. In some cases, these feelings were exacerbated by institutions which endeavored to use their power to force immigrants into western ways—as when Cohen's hungry younger siblings are induced, with the promise of food, to repeat Christian prayers in school (160-162)—and Ewen describes attempts to use charity to pressure immigrants into acculturating by noting that "immigrant mothers were constantly under attack for being 'old-fashioned'; social modernizers and social workers," she writes, "complained of the

old-world imprint on the ways in which mothers dressed, did housework, organized their days, gave birth, nursed infants, raised children, went shopping, or participated in community life” (16). This trend, rather than abating over time, became, in fact, more pronounced, eventually codifying itself into the organized Americanization movement of the 1920s, and, as a movement, it fostered the ‘settlement house’ concept, spawned national initiatives endorsed, variously, by both nativists and progressive reformers, and called for legislation mandating the promulgation of what Desmond King calls “‘educational’ Americanization” in schools across the country (87). This latter initiative, in particular, affected countless immigrants because, as we will see in Chapter Three, the American public school system was frequently the main point of socialization with native-born individuals through which they received an initiation—however limited it may have been—into western cultural mores.

In *Making Americans: Immigration, Race and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (2000), King precedes his analysis of the Americanization movement with a discussion of the major modes of assimilation prevalent in the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. “The sociologist Milton Gordon distinguishes three forms of assimilation in the context of American political development,” he writes: “the Anglo-Conformity model, under which assimilation is biased toward instilling members of the polity with Anglo-Saxon values and interests”; “the melting-pot model[,] in which that group longest present or most dominant in the United States does not determine the overall character of national identity”; and “assimilation as a form of cultural pluralism, under which scheme a multiplicity of ethnic groups and identities exist” (85). Gordon and King argue that “the assimilation process which best describes[,] historically[,] the experience of the United States is the first type, Anglo-Conformity” (85), not least because, as “Werner Sollors reminds

us,” the “‘melting pot’ . . . has often been used to actually mean” “‘Anglo-[C]onformity’” and “demand . . . a kind of cultural suicide as the price of acceptance” (Øverland 52),²⁰ with King adding that this is especially true “for the years under consideration in [his] study” (85). As the decades examined in *Making Americans* are concurrent with the immigration, life experiences, and writing careers of those authors discussed herein, assessing Anglo-Conformity as the dominant model of social and cultural integration in the U.S. during this era—or, in many cases, the model of *nonintegration*—is of particular salience. King contends that “the Anglo-Saxon group” lending their name to this paradigm was “based in [*sic*] the first English settlers and later northwestern European immigrants” (85) and that “by the mid-nineteenth-century, a dominant group in the United States, who were derived from this heritage and who thought of themselves as ‘Americans,’ was identifiable” (85-86). This “dominant group” was defined by several key characteristics, such as “their commitment to Protestantism and liberalism, their sense of self-worth and prosperity making them a chosen people, and their cultural separateness from non-whites and non-English,” and King maintains that “these characteristics structured both the Know-Nothing movement in the nineteenth century and the Americanization drive” (86). Furthermore,

between 1900 and 1929, a self-conscious effort was made to define this Anglo-American or American identity and to defend it as the product of a melting-pot assimilationism, and not simply as the maintenance of one group’s dominance, while deliberately controlling who was eligible to assimilate. (86)

Though not without its critics (Carol Aronovici, for example, brazenly asserted that labels such as “Anglo-Saxon, Teuton, or Latin merely designate particular species of

²⁰ Øverland is paraphrasing a section of Sollors’ foreword to *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

mongrels who, by long standing, have achieved the dignity of a fixed race or people”; 699), “this [Anglo-American] identity,” King reports, “was used politically in the Americanization movement,” with one contemporary commentator stating that the process’s native facilitators were responsible for “helping to form the political mind[s] of . . . future citizen[s], [and] developing in [them] a consciousness of the state, its power, needs, and claims, and of the position and duty of America among the nations” (Gibbs 522). Such rhetoric dovetailed with the new identity’s arrogated superiority, as did lionizing Americanization as “a task of superlative importance” which “[was] not a work of hasty propaganda,” but rather, “like all work of character formation, . . . a slow process of education” (552). Although Americanizers originally targeted Native Americans as part of this initiative (most other ‘races,’ such as African-Americans and Asians, were deemed wholly unassimilable), efforts in this arena were “judged a failure by the mid-twentieth century when [they] returned to a collective lifestyle” (King 86); therefore, “it is in respect to European immigrants . . . that Americanization was most intense” (87) and, as such, the movement’s effect on the country’s social, educational, political, and philanthropic institutions during this era is apposite to the discussion of immigrant literature conceived, in part, as a response to its writers’ experiences with such organizations.

Although variations of the movement which would later become known as Americanization existed before World War I (Orm Øverland reports that “while [its life] as an officially sponsored national movement was limited to the four-year period [of] 1914-1918, Americanization as a factual process has been at work from the time the first immigrant entered the United States”; 50), these variants’ codification into organized sociopolitical action is largely attributable to the intense nationalism extant in the United States during that period of international conflict. Prior to 1918,

Americanization—the teaching of the English language, “promot[ion] [of] literacy and knowledge of civic affairs” (King 88), and inculcation of western “values, beliefs, cultural practices, and identities” (Olneck 399) designed to supplant the old world mores of eastern European immigrants (or, alternatively, designed “to beat foreigners’ children into Protestant docility”; Hochschild 233)—was primarily effected in schools, because, as we will see in Chapter Three, “from the middle of the nineteenth century, the American public school system provided a powerful source of assimilation for immigrants and especially for immigrants’ children” (King 88). However, “‘educational’ Americanization was transformed . . . into a more intense form of ‘political’ Americanization” (87)—a transition evoked, rather adroitly, by one commentator’s assertion that “the call of the times is for educational statesmanship” (Gibbs 556)—“as the First World War and post-1918 years prompted an intensification in anti-immigrant feeling” and “exacerbated hostility toward immigrants” in the United States (King 87, 90). In 1920, Carol Aronovici, an early and outspoken critic of the process, observed that “only since the beginning of the war have [Americans] become truly conscious of the existence of a problem of Americanization,” which he views as “indicative of the fact that the war has brought before the American people for the first time the problem of a national unity” (703). However, “whether national unity means unanimity of opinion,” “unreserved recognition of a loyalty to all aspects of the present form and practice of government,” or “merely breaking away from all foreign allegiance and the participation in the affairs of the government of the United States is not always clear” (703). It was widely held that World War I “taught [Americans] the need of a more united people, speaking one language, thinking [in] one tradition, and holding allegiance to one patriotism” (Rider 110), and it thus encouraged a nationalistic view of domestic

Americanization programs as being critical to Allied victory in Europe. As such, Americanization became a *de facto* rallying cry for U.S. nationalism and “the secretary of the Interior agreed to the proposal that Americanization should be his department’s ‘War Measure’” (King 93), organizing, to that end, “State Councils of Defense [which] were instructed to vigorously pursue Americanization as part of the war effort” (95). “Indeed,” King writes, “it is difficult to underestimate the impact of the war on the Americanization drive, in two ways” (97).

First, the need of national leaders to galvanize support for the war permitted American populism work such as the “one hundred percent American” campaign. The aspersion “un-American” developed from the war’s end, a criterion (combined, in 1919, with race riots, the Palmer raids, and intense anti-immigrant sentiments) that collectively weakened the aspiration of cultural pluralists. (97)

The movement also preyed upon citizens’ “anxiety about the absence of ‘Americanism’ among aliens who made no declaration to naturalize as U.S. citizens” after 1918 (87) and, to the chagrin of the cultural pluralists King mentions, “in the wake of war, the Americanization campaign took on a distinctly nativist cast and a patriotic frenzy” (Barrett 1018). “To ensure that new immigrants had the opportunity to Americanize and to naturalize, some intellectuals, social workers, and politicians formed organizations dedicated to promoting their Americanization” which “received direct support from the Office of Education at the [United States] Department of the Interior” (King 88), and “this work at the Department of the Interior’s Education Bureau was complemented by . . . citizenship education initiatives from the Bureau of Naturalization in the Department of Labor.” These groups’ efforts to transform Americanization from an educational to a political endeavor led to the second reason that King believes it is “difficult to underestimate” the First World War’s effects on the development of the Americanization movement (97).

King contends that “in the postwar years, in frustration at the relative weakness of the Americanization movement, some Progressive reformers were increasingly drawn to stronger versions of this doctrine” (98), an assessment with which fellow historian Gary Gerstle agrees, the latter stating that after World War I many “rightward-leaning Progressives” (King 98) “lost their enthusiasm for reform altogether and reemerged, in the 1920s, as reactionaries—obsessed with restoring America to some imagined state of cultural homogeneity and moral purity” (Gerstle 1053). Exemplifying Gordon’s Anglo-Conformity model of assimilation (and thwarting the aims of cultural pluralists), “Americanizers held Americanization to be about assimilating new arrivals into a white Anglo-American conception of U.S. identity” and the movement’s “general characteristics” comprised “an exclusive process whose proponents wanted immigrants unequivocally to embrace Americanism and American values” (King 126). The ardent drive for Americanization embraced by many Progressives coincided with the rise of “scientific charity” (Rockaway *Words* 10) and, as Rockaway illustrates in *Words of the Uprooted*, the two ideologies frequently went hand in hand in the operation of charities. It is this powerful combination which informs the philanthropic practices to which Yeziarska’s stories respond, and it is important to note the way that her affluent American characters conflate the assimilationist aspects of Americanization, the ‘efficient’ practices of scientific charity and the self-aggrandizing proselytization of moral philanthropy to create a system of charity which attempts, above all else, to keep the lower classes in their place at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum.

In this vein, while discussing the manner in which other settlements are operated in *Arrogant Beggar*, the cadre of rich women running the Hellman Home makes their stance on such matters, in which they brook no dissenting opinions,

eminently clear. According to Mrs. Gessenheim, Mrs. Clark, ““a nice motherly soul” and the former superintendent of the ““Laura Sinclair Home,”” ““tried to run the place without rules,”” ““allow[ing] the girls to come in [at] all hours of the night. In no time the place got a bad name,”” she observes, and by the date of the ladies’ colloquy in the Hellman mansion the Sinclair Home is ““so heavily in debt, [that it] had to close down”” (64). ““I told them at the first conference,”” Gessenheim, who has been asked to help them ““solve their difficulties,”” arrogantly announces to the group, ““if they want to keep within their budget, they must realize that an institution is an institution.”” Upon hearing this statement, “the murmur of assent [grows] into a loud chatter.” ““All the Y.W. Homes are run on a strictly business basis,”” says one of the women; ““they don’t allow their sympathies to overrule their better judgment.”” ““That’s why they’re so successful,”” adds another. ““After all,”” chimes in a third, ““we’re living in a commercial age,”” to which comment a fourth responds that they ““ought to conduct the business of the Home the way an efficiency expert runs a factory”” (64). In keeping with these views, and running parallel to the institutional practices that Rockaway describes, Lindner’s first experience of the Hellman Home involves a well-appointed office (10), an interview (11), and the promise of an investigation of her references requiring ““at least a month”” to complete (12). In addition, and foreshadowing, with its emphasis on clerical exactitude, the organization’s strictly regulated nature, when Lindner’s excitement gets the better of her and she asks Miss Simons, one of the Home’s social workers, ““are you sure you won’t forget about me, with all your great work?”” (12), the woman responds to Adele’s question by explaining the efficiency of her office procedures. ““Oh no,”” she declares, taking great pride in her *modus operandi*, ““I make it a point never to neglect the *individual*.’ She with[draws] her hand” and shows the young woman “a

drawer of cards. ‘You see?’” she asks. “‘We are very systematic here. All our cases are filed, numbered, and card-catalogued. We keep a record of all our applications. This red clip over your card means special attention’” (12). Mirroring what Rockaway perceives as the fundamental division between American benefactors and their shtetl-descended beneficiaries, the woman’s response to Adele’s emotional need—the desire to be seen as a person and not ‘forgotten’ by Miss Simons as she goes about the rest of her work—is “‘systematic’” rather than reassuring. Simons tells Linder that she is “‘filed, numbered, and card-catalogued,’” hence she will not be forgotten, but in doing so she ignores the emotional component of Adele’s query and replies in wholly pragmatic terms. Adele, in the full flush of optimism at the prospect of living with her peers in such a well-kept establishment, does not register this disparity and eagerly overlooks what amounts to her first clue about the settlement’s true nature. The Hellman Home is depicted as ordered and strictly regulated from the outset: from Adele’s first moments in her room, which she spends reading the list of rules posted on its door (“‘Goodness!’” she exclaims. “‘Why do they need so many?’”; 21), to being ordered to wash dishes “‘scientifically’” in her “domestic service” training (40, 36) (there is even a rulebook for such dishwashing science; 40), every one of Lindner’s experiences at the Home speaks to an underlying rigidity which stifles the girl’s spirit. As such, when the relationship between the institution and the individual sours—a common and inevitable occurrence, the reader deduces from comments made by several long-term tenants shortly after Lindner’s arrival—it is not the Home which changes, but Adele’s attitude toward it.

Further complicating matters, whereas shtetl *tsdokeh* assumed no shortcomings on the part of the recipient and dictated that they were “to be spared humiliation” (Stubbs Introduction *xxix*),

moral philanthropy perceived poverty as a character flaw, a problem of bad habits or intemperate behavior. Regeneration was possible if the poor would adopt the Protestant ethic: hard work, discipline, order, punctuality, temperance, and “clean Christian living.” (Ewen 78)

Mrs. Hellman’s clutch of rich philanthropic ladies represents such thinking in *Arrogant Beggar*, with Yezierska using a scene in which Adele waits on them in the Hellman household to reveal their pompous and self-serving ideals to the reader. “I’m taking a course in Social Welfare with Dean Sopwell,” a Mrs. Stone informs her compatriots as Lindner serves them. “Only yesterday,” she reports, “her jewelled [*sic*] hand . . . patt[ing] back the carefully arranged marcel over her ear,” “he told us how struggle and hardship strengthen character” (62), and her instructor’s influence is clearly discernable when she says that she “think[s] [they]’re weakening the moral fibre of [their] girls,” as she calls the Home’s residents, “doing them a positive injury with so much pampering” (61-62). Mrs. Stone seems to agree with the point of view presented by Ewen, wherein destitution is the result of flawed character and can be corrected by adopting “the Protestant ethic” (Ewen 78), hence her proclamation, made while arguing against providing their charges with “luxuries they can’t afford when they’re out of [the ladies’] care,” that the Board of Directors “must not let [their] affection for [the girls] cloud [their] vision as to what is wisest and best for their future welfare” (Yezierska *Beggar* 62). “What is wisest and best” for the Home’s residents, apparently, is deprivation – or, perhaps more accurately, retaining access to only the barest minimum of amenities. “You all know the besetting vices of the working class are discontent and love of pleasure,” Stone tells the other ‘reformers’ (62),²¹ which statement reiterates the dubious notion that

²¹ Yezierska, missing no chance to imbue the characters’ conversation with hypocritical irony, notes that the woman expostulates thus immediately prior to a luncheon full of sensual pleasures including “cocktails” (67), “olives,” “squabs on toast, asparagus, endive salad,” and “strawberries”—which, the

penurious immigrants are responsible for their own plight while reinforcing the idea that they, the American ladies of the Hellman Home's Board of Directors, must uplift the 'poor souls' by teaching them that "'the corner stone [*sic*] of their character and happiness should be a love of honest toil and a devotion to thrift and economy'" (62).

Mrs. Stone's numerous injunctions and exhortations—especially those concerned with instilling "'a love of honest toil and a devotion to thrift and economy'" in her social subordinates—betray the charity's true intent: as an institution, its function comprises convincing its residents to accept their place as lower-class laborers born to serve those above them in the American socioeconomic hierarchy. At one point, the woman admits that she is "'quite worried about the future of [their] girls,'" but her determination to "'[use] all of [the Board's] knowledge and wisdom to help them face life'" is based on her desire to ensure that they can "'face the conditions in which they are born[,] and to which they must adjust themselves'" (62). Such statements imply that her true motivation is the perpetuation of a class-based oppression which disallows upward mobility, and, as 'scientific charity,' 'moral philanthropy,' and the nationalistic agendas of Americanizers frequently overlapped in the real world, so Yezierska combines aspects of these three movements in her depictions of fictional philanthropic institutions and, pointedly, in the characters of the philanthropists themselves. As evinced by her deferential citation of "'Dean Sopwell'" (62), Mrs. Stone obviously subscribes to the tenets of scientific charity, but the author also uses the ideals of moral philanthropy to great advantage in this scene as she deftly positions the ladies' high words in direct opposition to their actions. In response to Stone's assertion that they are "'weakening the moral fibre'" of their

protagonist indignantly notes, are out of season, and therefore as rare as they are expensive—"mashed and frozen in thick cream" (68). As is addressed in Chapter Four, which focuses on economic assertions of identity in the consumer-driven world of early-twentieth century America, the author is fond of using food to represent power, prestige, and self-indulgent luxury.

charges and “doing them a positive injury with so much pampering” (61-62), for instance, a Mrs. Gordon declares that the Board “must not confuse [the girls] standards of living with [their] own” (62). A Mrs. White concurs, adding that “it would be utterly disastrous for them to get wrong notions of superiority” (62), and a short but indignant discussion of “shop girls wearing silk stockings, [and] fur coats” ensues, during which the author draws attention to Mrs. Gordon’s “broad-tail bag” and matching “made-to-order broad-tail shoes” as the woman opines that they must “make [the girls] see how much better simple things are than all their finery” (63). As we will see in Chapter Four, Yeziarska had previously addressed such matters in exquisite detail with *Salome of the Tenement*’s “democracy of beauty” (*Salome* 27), but, as they are among the writer’s favorite topics, *Arrogant Beggar* uses these sentiments to strengthen the hypocritical cast of the rich women’s discourse.

To further emphasize the affluent cadre’s pious dissimulation, Yeziarska, as she pits the group’s words against their deeds, portrays the wealthy women as jealously protective of their diets in addition to being preoccupied with ruthlessly guarding the exclusivity of their fine accoutrements. While debating the merits of keeping ‘their girls’ well fed (because, as Mrs. White studiously notes, “hungry people are always discontented”), Mrs. Stone, for example, folding her “jewelled [*sic*] hands” in her lap, is adamant that “roast beef is only for people who can afford it” (65), while several pages earlier one of group avers that they “have no right to forget [that] [they]’re feeding an institution and not [their] own families” (63). As such, Mrs. Hellman is admonished by her peers for wanting to give the young women at the Home “a real treat—chicken, salad, ice cream, and cake” in honor of her own birthday (65); “it’s very sweet of you to want to make the girls happy for a day,” says Miss Simons, “a troubled shadow flicker[ing] in her pale blue eyes” as she

“fidget[s] unhappily” in her chair, ““but we must be aware of rousing their appetites. It will only lead to a greater discontent later on.”” Indeed, given the group’s desire to keep the young women in their care from overstepping the socioeconomic boundaries imposed on them from above, this discontent—mentioned multiple times in the course of their meeting and assumed, apprehensively, to be the general catalyst for class transgression—seems to be the ‘philanthropic’ cabal’s greatest fear because, as one of them expostulates, ““it’s very hard to keep the undisciplined girls who come to [them] from wanting more and more”” (65). “And so,” the narrator announces, alluding to the “discipline” and “temperance” of Ewen’s “Protestant ethic” (78), “for the good of the girls’ souls[,] Mrs. Hellman’s wish to feast them was overruled” (Yeziarska *Beggar* 65). Laying bare her true motivation, Mrs. Hellman, who subsequently telephones a newspaper editor and berates him for prioritizing a ““stupid financial delegation from Europe”” when she was expecting his staff to photograph the Board for an ““article . . . in . . . Sunday’s supplement”” (“the poor man,” she exclaims, has ““no sense of values!””; 67), murmurs that the banquet ““would have made . . . a splendid newspaper story”” (65), ““and publicity for the Home is so essential”” (66). The fact that this scene’s exchange on restraint and temperance is followed by a luncheon full of rich food and rare, expensive treats, consumed while the author offers descriptions of the appetites and corpulence of the ladies themselves, makes it all the more hypocritically provocative.

In another of *Arrogant Beggar*’s privileged social scenes witnessed by Adele Lindner in the capacity of a domestic servant, Arthur Hellman’s sister, Edna, speaking to an unnamed man at one of her brother’s *soirées*, declares that she is ““bored of going from party to party”” (78) and wants to take up charity work like the rest of her family. In addition to her dubious motivation (Yeziarska uses the opportunity to

lampoon individuals undertaking philanthropy as a hobby rather than as a genuine reformatory endeavor), the young woman's stereotypically Anglo-Saxon methodology firmly aligns her with the scientific charity movement embraced by Americanizers in the wake of World War I. "I just finished a course in the *School of Philanthropy*," she tells her companion; "you have no idea how much is needed to be done for the poor," "but it's work that must be done by trained minds with scientific vision" (79). In addition to echoing Mrs. Stone's statement about her "course in Social Welfare" (62) and reinforcing her coterie's view of philanthropy as an endeavor which requires both formal training and rigid structure, Edna's comments open the door to further intranarrative criticism. "Trained minds—scientific vision," mocks her brother, overhearing the conversation; they are "fine phrases—great words," he says, but, catching sight of Adele and laughing, he professes (rather ironically, given his own charitable comportment) that "[he pities] the poor victims of trained minds and scientific vision" (79). The lighthearted delivery of Hellman's jibe does little to mask its sardonic nature, and its irony, given the rigidity of his own philanthropic practices, elucidates what Yeziarska no doubt saw as the absurdity of the woman's remarks. Whereas Mrs. Stone is, according to her statement, enrolled in a single class on the subject, Edna mentions an entire "*School of Philanthropy*," the author hinting, here, that the concept's allure is due to its being *en vogue* rather than being attributable to the effectiveness of its regimented—and self-professed—scientific practicality. Indeed, in light of Edna Hellman's comments, and those made by the Board of Directors in earlier scenes, charity seems to be the stylish accessory of choice for the novel's image-conscious elite (and nor is this an isolated phenomenon, as one contemporary critic claimed that "it is almost the fashion now to talk, write, or organize in the interest of Americanization work"; Aronovici 729), resulting in a sort

of *haute* philanthropy pursued for the sole purpose of garnering complimentary responses from others, be they the wearer's peers, prominent mass media outlets, or even the poor themselves. Yezierska, in setting up such a dynamic, uses the novel's high-society set to create a complex, circular critique of American benevolence wherein these characters' predilections for scientific charity and moral philanthropy, as well as their strong links to institutional giving, damn those movements as much as the espousal of their philosophical tenets works to undermine the ladies' personal, as well as their aggregate philanthropic credibility. This downward spiral, with its ultimately depressive nature, stands in stark contrast to the magnanimous, uplifting and emotionally fulfilling cycle represented by Muhmenkeh and perpetuated in the old woman's name, after her death, by Adele, and this dichotomous juxtapositioning of ideals forms the backbone of the narrative's social critique even as it displays a timely concern with the era's proclivity for applying industrial efficiency to institutions whose purview was, ostensibly, compassionate human kindness.

“‘Questioned like a Criminal’”:²²

Professionalism, Efficiency, and Institutional Aid

Rockaway argues that the disparity of opinion regarding how to assist others—that is, personally versus institutionally or, in more emotional terms, ‘compassionately’ versus ‘efficiently’—which created animosity between immigrants and their benefactors in the United States is due, in large part, to the fact that many aid societies’ ownership, funding and administration were primarily in the hands of affluent, Americanized German Jews who were much more culturally and socially

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integrated than their recently-arrived counterparts. In support of this claim, the historian references an investigation by the *Jewish American* weekly newspaper, during which, while researching an eastern European boycott of the United Jewish Charities in Detroit, “the editor discovered that what the German Jewish managers of the relief fund considered to be efficient procedures, the immigrants found to be” “hard-hearted, lacking in sympathy, and without the spirit of true charity” (*Words* 10; “Ethnic Conflict” 137). According to Rockaway, “these differing attitudes and perceptions created misunderstandings and tensions between the newcomers and their German Jewish benefactors,” and because of this, Russian Jews “complained that [the charity’s] practices humiliated them and made them feel like beggars,” resulting in a widespread refusal to apply to the organization for aid (*Words* 10). ““Every poor man is questioned like a criminal, is looked down upon”” by the ““aristocratic German Jews in their beautiful offices, desks all decorated, but [with] strict and angry faces,”” wrote a commentator in another Yiddish daily; ““every unfortunate suffers self-degradation and shivers like a leaf, just as if he were standing before a Russian official”” (Berger 233). Such claims prove that individual misunderstandings, like the aforementioned dispute between Mrs. Samuel Friedman and David Bressler of the IRO, were not isolated incidents. Charles Zwirn, an immigrant satisfied with the help he received from the Industrial Removal Office, writes, in a letter of thanks to the organization’s deputy director, Philip Seman, that “as long as an applicant does not become impertinent, he is treated in the most respectful manner” (Rockaway *Words* 120); however, it is clear, from the many letters of complaint included alongside Zwirn’s, that advancing even the most anodyne of questions about the IRO’s procedures was considered, by some of the agents, to be ‘impertinence’ of the highest order. And yet, because of the fundamental differences between old world and new

world charity, such questions persisted. For immigrants hailing from an environment wherein “the collective survival of the shtetl demanded . . . a framework of mutual aid” (Ewen 46)—and in which keeping money or food for oneself rather than sharing with the community equated to “miserliness [and], in the view of the shtetl, [was] worse than un-Jewish, it [was] anti-Jewish” (Zborowski & Herzog 265)—being professionally interviewed and examined in order to determine both the validity of a claim and the amount of aid required could be extremely intimidating, if not construed as an indictment of one’s honesty. As American relief organizations became increasingly concerned with what they considered ‘efficient’ ways of assisting the needy (and, as a result, endeavored to assess the legitimacy of their claimants’ applications), they treated recent arrivals in a fashion that the latter deemed uncharitable at best; at worst, they considered it overtly hostile.

This process, while casting light on Yeziarska’s continued ambivalence—and, in some cases, antipathy—toward charitable institutions, is also indicative of a larger division amongst Jews in the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. On the one hand, both the German-American benefactors and their Pale of Settlement beneficiaries were Jewish, and the former felt a genuine obligation to assist those whom Cahan calls, in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, “their Russian co-religionists” (195). On the other hand, however, many of the Jews providing money (Rockaway reports that “by 1910 American Jews were spending \$10 million annually on philanthropy”; *Words* 9), resources and personnel to these philanthropic endeavors came to the United States, or were descended from those who had come, in an earlier wave of immigration that had originated in Northern and Western Europe, and thus considered itself culturally superior to the new arrivals, and which, “over a period of fifty years[,] . . . had acculturated socially and religiously and [was] comfortably

adjusted, politically and economically, to America” (5). According to Rockaway, although this prior wave of Jewish immigrants “recognized their obligation to help their brethren, they vehemently opposed any sizeable [contemporary] immigration to the United States” (5). Like similar groups of Jews in Germany, France and Great Britain, who, “by 1880[,] . . . had achieved emancipation and acculturation and could be found among their country’s economic, political, and cultural leaders,” and who “feared that their hard-won status would be jeopardized by an influx of alien, backward, lower-class, Yiddish-speaking Jews,” this established Jewish-American community was nervous that “hordes of Orthodox, impoverished, unkempt, and anarchistic co-religionists” (5) arriving in the country would have a noxious effect on the power and respect they had earned since their arrival in the United States half a century before. Stubbs, succinctly conveying their perceived disparity, writes that “German Jews were stereotyped as ‘uptown’ Jews, [while] Russian Jews were ‘downtown’ Jews” (Introduction xxx), but many German-Americans suspected “their gentile neighbors would fail to differentiate between them and these ‘unenlightened Jews’” (Rockaway *Words* 5). “If this happened, feared the German Jews, everything they had worked for would be destroyed” (6). One newspaper, the *American Hebrew*, worried that such equation would result in prejudice “‘potentially not less dangerous to the Jews of refinement and culture in [the United States] than the horrors of Russian persecution’” (qtd. in Wyszowski 345), and community leaders, including those who would go on to establish and fund the IRO, argued that swift Americanization of the new arrivals would ease the tensions brewing on the eastern seaboard by alleviating “the ill-effects of congestion in the cities, where Yiddish-speaking, gesticulating tenement dwellers were a source of embarrassment and potential anti-semitism [*sic*]” (Rockaway *Words* 7). Once it was founded, this belief

formed the core of the IRO's mentality as well, its organizers believing that "acculturation and Americanization would . . . ensue more rapidly once the immigrants left [the] Yiddish-speaking milieu" of their ethnic enclaves (7), and, as Rockaway demonstrates via Wyszowski's "The *American Hebrew*: An Exercise in Ambivalence" (1987), such cultural integration was frequently viewed as matter of safety for the entirety of American Jewry.

Based on Rose Cohen's autobiography, and on the spate of letters included in Rockaway's collection, it seems that—theoretically speaking, at least—the IRO's founders were not too wide of the mark, though, in practice, each individual's personality and willingness to adapt were major factors in their acculturation regardless of the location in which it was undertaken. Cohen supports the idea that many New York Jews persisted in their old ways due to immersion in the "Yiddish-speaking milieu" of day-to-day East Side life when she describes her first trip outside of the ghetto to "the part of the city . . . called 'uptown,' [as] strange to [her] as if it were in a different country" (Rockaway *Words* 7; R. Cohen 233). Recounting the experience in *Out of the Shadow*, Cohen, describing her own situation as well as that of thousands of her contemporaries living on the Lower East Side, claims that "although almost five years had passed since [she] . . . started for America it was only now that [she] caught a glimpse of it. For though [she] was in America [she] had lived in practically the same environment which [her family had] brought from home" (246). There was, of course, "a difference in [the Gollups'] joys, in [their] sorrows, in [their] hardships, for after all," Cohen writes, "this was a different country; but on the whole [they] were still in [their] village in Russia" despite living in New York City, one of the contemporary United States' most bustling and cosmopolitan metropolises (246). Such situations were not unique to New York Jews, and Jane Addams, a

pioneer of the settlement home movement and founder of Chicago's Hull House, relates a similar story about "an Italian woman" who "once expressed her pleasure in the red roses that she saw at one of [Hull House's] receptions, in surprise that they had been 'brought so fresh from Italy.'" "She had lived in Chicago for six years and had never seen any roses, whereas in Italy she had seen them in great profusion. During all that time," Addams writes,

the woman had lived within ten blocks of a florist's window; she had not been more than a five-cent ride away from a public park; but she had never dreamed of faring farther forth for herself and no one had taken her. Her [only] conception of America had been the untidy street in which she had lived. (110-111)

The immigrant's situation in Chicago is very similar to Cohen's in that her isolated existence in an ethnic 'colony' is interrupted by the intervening hand of charity—in this case, the woman's interaction with the Hull House settlement home—and while Addams, one of the Progressive Era's most prominent reformers and the recipient, in 1931, of a Nobel Peace Prize, has obvious, and possibly biased reasons for recounting this exchange, it is important to note the insular nature of the Italian woman's existence.

Ewen offers direct commentary on Addams' recollection of this event when she writes that "Italian and Jewish settlement patterns on [New York's] Lower East side reflected the absolute necessity for family and ethnic cohesion" and asserts that "new immigrants lived and worked huddled together in tenement houses within easy reach of [their jobs in] the garment district, surrounded by peddler stands and shops where language was not a barrier" (63). While these ethnic enclaves were "caught in the margins between old and new[,] . . . a curious admixture of tradition and change," first generation immigrants derived "a great deal of comfort . . . from this partial

reconstruction of the old country: they nestled in communities of common language, bound by ties of custom, ritual, and institutions—a world not lost, but rebuilt” (63). Immigrant neighborhoods were nexuses of uneasy fusion, loci of intense change arranged, predominately, along generational lines, but reformers frequently missed the “new-world adaptation” and “curious admixture of tradition and change” present in these locations, seeing, instead, only the “reconstruction of the old country” (63). This disparity of perceptions, combined with the aforementioned “obligation to help their brethren” (Rockaway *Words* 5), prevailed upon a number of potential benefactors and predicated a system of charity which encouraged assimilation (and thereby aligned it, at least superficially, with the antecedents of the Americanization movement), removed the financial providers from the company of their recipients, and necessitated the employment of paid social workers rather than volunteers, resulting, unfortunately, in the style of aid which Yeziarska considered so suspect. The consequent modern, ‘scientific charities’ were often the first—and sometimes the only—American institutions new immigrants came into contact with in the new world, and they tarnished the image of the United States, convincing the poor to stay within their own corner of New York City in order to avoid the confusion, humiliation and degradation that they felt they were receiving at the hands of America as a whole. Indeed, some Jewish groups sought to intercept and transform recent arrivals before they had the chance to meet any native-born Americans and inadvertently perpetuate negative stereotypes amongst the general population, with one contemporary publication, the *Jewish Messenger*, even going so far as to advocate “sending American Jewish missionaries to Russia ‘to civilize them there rather than giv[ing] them the opportunity to Russianize [Jews]’” in the United States (Rockaway *Words*

6).²³ These actions, rather than fostering Jewish unity and encouraging the acculturation of recent arrivals, exacerbated tensions between the two groups in the United States, and nowhere was this more apparent than in New York, the majority of new immigrants' first port of call.

Although she seems, like many other new immigrants, to have nebulously—and negatively—viewed individual charities as part of an overarching, imposing and unified 'American' edifice and to have been largely ignorant of the German Jewish backing of some of these institutions during her early life in the country, Yeziarska obviously become aware of the American Jewish community's presence in such philanthropies as her writing career progressed. As a result, the character of philanthropists' names in her work changes over time. In earlier texts, such as *Hungry Hearts* (1920), *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), and *Children of Loneliness* (1923), a collection of short stories, blandly American-sounding, English-influenced names like John Barnes and John Manning are standard fare, with surnames such as the English 'Ward' and the Anglo-Saxon-descended 'Olney' also in evidence;²⁴ in later novels, such as *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), while names such as Stone and White represent the Anglo contingent, the Germanesque family names of Gessenheim and Hellman take precedence, with the author choosing, pointedly, to give the narrative's main antagonists the latter appellation. Stubbs contends that in *Arrogant Beggar*, "the

²³ Editorial, *Jewish Messenger* [New York City, NY] 20 May 1881, 4. "For examples of [similarly] strong negative reactions" to contemporary immigration (*Words* 212), Rockaway directs the reader to Esther Panitz's "The Polarity of American Jewish Attitudes toward Immigration (1870-1891)" (*American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 53.2 (1963): 99-130), Zosa Szajkowski's "The Attitude of American Jews to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1893)" (*Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40.3 (1951): 221-280), and Gerald Sorin's "Mutual Contempt, Mutual Benefit" (*American Jewish History* 81.1 (1993): 24-59).

²⁴ Although great pains have been taken to show the constructed nature of American 'Anglo-Saxon' identity, the term's use here is valid as perhaps the only truly accurate application of the term extant in this research: although its spelling has changed over time, 'Olney' is a Saxon word which made its way into Old English as a geographical appellation, the most prominent modern example of which is the English town of Olney, located in the Milton Keynes region of Buckinghamshire, which traces the origin of its name to the tenth century. It is from this usage, and this region, that 'Olney' as a habitational surname was born.

names of several of the charity givers—Hellman, Stone, Gordon, Gessenheim—might . . . be Christian. . . . But it is more likely that these are intended to be German Jewish names” (Introduction xxx). “If indeed the benefactors are Jews,” she argues,

then according to Yeziarska’s terms they are not good Jews. Far from discreetly assisting the needy, the philanthropists conspicuously advertise their charity work in the newspaper; in every way, these assimilated German Jews disregard the *tsdokeh* of Russian Jewish tradition. (xxx)

As such, she concludes, “*Arrogant Beggar* can . . . be interpreted not simply as an attack on the American charity system but also as registering the irrelevance of shtetl tradition to the lives of assimilated Jews in America” – a point which, given Rockaway’s description of concurrent developments in American charity, bears up well under scrutiny. Although, “in the shtetl, the *tsdokeh* conception of charity was crucial to the survival of the community, joining the individual to the larger Jewish group,” such a conception seemed almost anathema to the American ideals of individualism and autonomy. Despite the ghetto’s *de facto* separation from the rest of the city in which it resided, “in the United States, the cohesive, insular conditions of the shtetl did not exist, and such communitarian ideals appeared impractical” (xxx-xxxi), hence the desire, on the part of organizations such as the IRO, to supersede these ideals with their own philosophy of practical, businesslike efficiency.

Ostensibly, as has been previously noted, in the mind of the new immigrant old world charity was undertaken due to an individual’s genuine compassion for the plight of others and, perhaps more importantly, out of a sense of religious obligation. This latter attribute of charitable giving was, with the easing of Jewish religious strictures in the United States, being slowly eroded in certain quarters, contributing to what Stubbs’ calls “the irrelevance of shtetl tradition” in *Arrogant Beggar* (xxx). Another, earlier example of Yeziarska’s undermining of this tradition can be found in

Bread Givers' Reb Smolinsky, who gives a tenth of the family's wages to charity in addition to supporting a number of lodges and societies which are involved in relief efforts for the poor, sick, and needy. The patriarch of the Smolinsky household maintains that to "stop [his] charities" would be "like stopping the breath of God in [him]. It says in the Holy Torah, "No man is too poor to help those who are poorer than himself"" (90). He also declares that the "societies [he] belong[s] to are more to [him] than [his] life," and asks "can I shut my heart to the cry of those starving Russians when they send me those begging letters for help?" Always bombastic, however, the rabbi does not stop there; Yeziarska pushes his speech toward melodrama as he chastises his wife for suggesting that he curtail his charitable giving in order to put food on his own family's table or buy new clothes for his daughters. "Would you want me to stop my dues to the Convalescent Home that takes care of the poor sick from hospitals?" he rails,

or the Old People's Home that is sheltering the poor homeless ones in their old age? Should I take my little mite away from the Free Day Nursery that is taking care of the little helpless babies whose mothers must go to work? Or could I stop my dues to the Free Hebrew School, the one place in America that keeps alive the flame of the Holy Torah? (90)

Reb Smolinsky's charity and his religion are, to him, inextricably linked, and this scene would initially appear to endorse the man's charity over its institutional American counterpart and reiterate the religious underpinnings of Jewish generosity. Yet Yeziarska frames such passages with others that demonstrate, in unequivocal terms, the man's tyrannical and self-aggrandizing personality, and which thereby undermine the supposedly selfless nature of his claims. Indeed, one senses that it is not his wife's suggestion regarding his charitable practices, but rather her questioning of his authority in general that elicits such an explosively indignant response. As

Yezierska systematically erodes the pious altruism which allegedly underlies Smolinsky's actions, we see that his charity and his religion are not merely inseparable: they are, in fact, both symbiotic and supremely self-serving. According to Moisheh Smolinsky's reasoning, his old world orthodoxy bids him give money to charities that further "the flame of the Holy Torah" in America while also contributing to the feeding of "starving Russians" back home, at once vicariously returning him to his homeland, which bolsters his faith, and supporting institutions which will teach the new world to appreciate old-fashioned Jewish piety, and, therefore, create a culture in the United States in which he will be greatly admired for religious piety, of which charitable giving is an critical manifestation. Ewen states that generously helping others in the shtetl "brought high status within the community" (47) and, though he would likely deny it, Moisheh Smolinsky is counting on this attitude to win him esteem in the new world as well. In this regard, the rabbi can be likened to Mrs. Hellman's cadre of upper-class philanthropic friends in *Arrogant Beggar*, whose actions in organizing and funding events for the Hellman Home seem to be motivated primarily by a desire for acclaim and the satisfaction of seeing themselves profiled in various newspapers (Yezierska *Beggar* 65-67).

Important, too, is the fact that despite his piety and decidedly old-fashioned nature Smolinsky does not help his beneficiaries directly as is traditional in Jewish charity. In his own words, Smolinsky, while living in the United States, gives money to "charities" and "societies" with altruistic interests (*Givers* 90), and in this Yezierska is illustrating a subtle shift away from tradition in the man's charitable practices. Smolinsky contends that he is aiding others as God and the Torah command, yet in the manner of his giving he is casually, almost subconsciously, drifting toward the American paradigm of funding intermediary institutions rather

than prosecuting eastern European modes of aid in the west. The author thus intentionally begins to blur the line between old world traditions and new, and, ever trying to strike a balance between the two, she does not choose one style of charity over the other. While acknowledging that eastern European aid was often based on sound religious principles, Yezierska is also harshly critical of Smolinsky's giving; she hints at ulterior motives for his charity, such as supporting various societies in order to increase his own social and spiritual standing in the community, describes how he "hammer[s] out his preaching like a wound-up phonograph" (156), and portrays him as a tyrant who, "before he got the money in his hand," "already knew of some poor widow, or a helpless orphan, miles away, who needed it more than his own wife and children who were right under his nose, so close that he couldn't see them" (91). Although Cahan's Reb Sender, David Levinsky's friend and religious mentor in Russia, says that "a good deed that comes easy to you is like a donation which does not cost you anything" (*Levinsky* 29)—implying that true Jewish generosity involves more than just giving what one can easily afford in terms of money, goods or labor—Yezierska paints Smolinsky as a blowhard and a religious zealot who takes this charitable attitude to the extreme.

In point of fact, that Yezierska imputes the man with such a pronounced interest in charity exemplifies his complete domination of the home and nearly every aspect of his wife's and daughters' lives, and, when viewed alongside his various society memberships, it works to undermine, for the reader, his purportedly orthodox beliefs. According to Ewen, traditional, old world charity of the sort supposedly preferred by Moisheh Smolinsky, despite his giving to benevolent "'societies'" rather than directly to the poor (Yezierska *Givers* 90), over America's sterile, German-Jewish-funded equivalent, is traditionally the dominion of the wife. "Charity was tied

to the Sabbath,” she writes, “and giving food to those who were poorer was the woman’s responsibility” (Ewen 42), which situation Cahan evinces in *Levinsky* when David reminisces that his mother, “poor as she was . . . seldom let a Friday pass without distributing a few half-groschen (an eighth of a cent) in charity” (*Levinsky* 12). *Levinsky* seems almost as critical as *Yeziarska*, however, when he recounts, in the same paragraph, that “the amusing part of it was the fact that one of the beggars on her list was far better off than she.” Ewen also reports that “it was a blessing to make food for the sick, to provide a meal for a penniless yeshiva student, or to offer homemade jam to visitors” (47) and describes “the spirit of traditional female Jewish charity” as being embodied by selflessly giving food to the needy (in many cases, nearly to the point of leaving one’s own family hungry) and giving of one’s time and labor to assist others in their daily tasks (42-43). These sentiments, with the exception of cooperative labor, are co-opted by the patriarch of the Smolinsky household and used for his own ends: Reb Smolinsky engages in charity for the advancement of his own revered reputation as a pious community leader as well as using it to subjugate his female household by aggressively monopolizing the family’s religion, which includes, as it were, their religiously-mandated giving. One might argue that Smolinsky’s charitable and social concerns are a mark of personal growth and an adoption of a more forward-thinking, American mentality with regard to religious gender roles; however, based on the rest of his actions in the text, such a shift in the man’s thinking seems highly unlikely. Indeed, even in more Americanized Jewish communities living outside the confines of New York City, Jewish social aid seems to have been a uniquely feminine dominion even when it was pursued professionally or semi-professionally. In Birmingham, Alabama, for example, Abraham Solomon, one of the IRO’s traveling agents charged with drumming up support and engaging

employees for that institution's local offices, had trouble finding men who were willing to undertake the task of assisting Jews sent to their community. "Again I turned to the women," he informs director David Bressler in a letter sent to the organization's headquarters, making it clear that this is not an isolated incident, "and I found that only amongst them are social workers to be found" (Rockaway *Words* 65). In the end, *Bread Givers*' readers are left wondering whether Yeziarska's creation has any truly altruistic tendencies or if he is only giving for personal gain, as a way to control the women in his life, and to the overall detriment of his family and religious principles. For the author, neither system—old world or new—was flawless in either conception or execution, and her fiction seems to argue for some combination of the two wherein the emotional and philanthropic ideals of the east meet the intelligent, intellectual and independent mentality of the west. Critically, a desire for such synthesis underlies all of her work, regardless of what aspect of culture she describes.

“The Breath of God”:²⁵ Perpetuating the Cycle of Benevolence

An example of this hybridity, and of Yeziarska's growing maturity as a writer, presents itself for examination in the final section of *Arrogant Beggar*. Originally published in 1927, after the height of the Progressive Era, *Arrogant Beggar* is, at first glance, a sustained attack on what Yeziarska saw as the cold, humiliating, and ineffectual practices of organized American philanthropy and the arrogant, duplicitous, and self-serving motives of its organizers. It is also, with the possible exception of a few short stories such as “The Fat of the Land” and “The Free Vacation House,” her

²⁵ Yeziarska *Bread Givers* 90

most singularly focused work of fiction – one in which, although the heroine is pulled in a number of different directions (most notably, back and forth in her ambivalent relationship with the Hellmans), Yeziarska's characters' ubiquitous struggles with poverty, tradition, oppressive family life, independence, education, love, and emotional and artistic expression do not crash against one another with such force that they deafen her in the cacophonous whirlwind of frantic and frustrated internal voices so characteristic of the author's earlier work. The novel's protagonist, Adele Lindner, is still subject to a great deal of internal conflict during the course of the narrative, but the text, in eschewing some of Yeziarska's earlier narrative mainstays, becomes, by comparison, a fairly streamlined story that is free to focus more fully, and without interruption, on its major themes, which include the dual nature of progressive philanthropy, the importance of independent thought and action, and the redemptive power of a strong community spirit. Such emphasis on community, as we will see in Chapter Four, channels contemporary notions of democratic involvement, which the author had previously explored in *Salome of the Tenements*, but in *Arrogant Beggar*, the plot's resolution—represented by Lindner's community-oriented café, which allows its customers to pay what they can afford and take change from a brass bowl on the honor system (128)—leans more toward socialism than democracy. By simplifying *Arrogant Beggar*'s plot and removing some of the standard Yeziarskan forces acting upon her main character, thereby making Adele's journey more coherent and increasing its intellectual and critical impact on the reader, the writer allows the book to become as much a celebration of selfless giving as a polemic against the captiously sententious and self-serving practices of modern American philanthropy. It is, therefore, one of the writer's most effective works in the sense that it, more than any of her previous attempts, presents both a sustained, focused critique of a

contemporaneous socioeconomic problem and offers one of the author's most believable and fully-realized depictions of a potential solution for that problem in the form of Adele's community-centered, socially conscious coffee shop (fittingly named "Muhmenkeh's," in honor of her Jewish mentor; 126), which successfully combines her eastern European communal sensibilities with domestic service and design skills learned at the American Hellman Home for Working Girls. Crucial to the overall emotional impact of the narrative, however, in stripping away some of her fiction's most pervasive struggles—such as that brought on by the need to rebel against a domineering father and a submissive, traditional mother (Lindner is an orphan; 11)—and in lessening others (such as the struggle for American identity and citizenship: Adele is, in contrast to the great majority of Yezierska's protagonists, a born American; 11), Yezierska does not remove so much that the character ceases to be confused by the contradictions and double standards presented by her situation. The resulting story is one in which the audience readily identifies with the protagonist and her plight; for Adele Lindner, though at times internally conflicted to the point of meltdown, is a much less melodramatic character than her predecessors, and the novel as a whole—including Yezierska's critique of backhanded charity—benefits from this.

The novel progresses in stages, beginning with Adele's desperate, idealistic hope for the future as characterized by her saintly, almost deified vision of the Hellmans as the 'saviors' of the working girl, and proceeds, by degrees, through suspicion, embarrassment, indignation and anger before finally resolving on a note of understanding and acceptance. In the first stage, Lindner is optimistic, enjoys living in the Hellman Home with her peers, and excuses the settlement's flaws. In the second stage—which Stubbs calls "the first stage of [her] disenchantment" (Introduction xxvii)—Adele, who "sees in Mrs. Hellman a friend and mentor" (xxvii),

visits the latter's mansion and is treated "as a mendicant who must be reminded of her place" (xxvii), with the philanthropist even going so far as to shudder and wipe the young woman's thankful, enthusiastic kiss off of her cheek when she believes that she is unobserved (Yeziarska *Beggar* 47). The third stage commences when Lindner is employed to wait on the Home's Board of Directors and overhears their conversation, including Mrs. Hellman's admission that she is employing her charge for much less than is standard for such services, and it comprises the young woman's rebellion and "subsequent denunciation of the Home [which] targets the benefactors' condescension, the self-loathing that it creates in the charity recipient, and the way such charity enforces class distinctions rather than abolishing them" (Stubbs Introduction xxviii). Every aspect of her experience, from the Home's strict rules to the rich ladies' assertion, made while Lindner is waiting on them, that "the best pleasure you can buy for your money is to help the poor" (Yeziarska *Beggar* 67) (and its implication that personal gratification, rather than altruism, is the catalyst for their charity), contributes to what Adele calls "the whole sickening farce of Big Sistering the Working Girl" (55), and in a fit of rage she abandons the Hellman Home and returns to the ghetto. In the final stage, the young woman meets Muhmenkeh; Arthur Hellman, intrigued by the girl's fiery independence, follows her to the East Side, proposes, and is rejected; and Lindner begins her own community endeavor which reconciles her ideas about charity with those of the Hellmans. During this final stage, Arthur—who has been depicted far more sympathetically than his mother and her friends—seems, at times, to understand and embrace Lindner's mentality; yet Adele cannot forget his earlier condescension and bristles at his offer of marriage.

In some ways, Arthur Hellman can be seen as typical of Yeziarska's western male characters. However, despite going awry in his previous philanthropic efforts,

Arthur, unlike most of author's American-born men, such as John Manning, the "high-bred," "icy," and inflexible American "patrician" whom the protagonist seduces into marriage in *Salome of the Tenements* (1, 129, 84), is willing to learn from his mistakes and try a more personal approach to assisting the lower classes. This willingness to adapt leads to a touching and witty scene in which he attempts to cook for the convalescing Adele after the latter's passionate exit from the Hellman Home. From the moment of Lindner's departure, Hellman—drawn to her fierce idealism and admiring the bravery that she has shown in standing up to his mother—searches for the missing girl, and, upon locating her in Muhmenkeh's basement flat and learning that she is ill, he incongruously spends the next few days in the role of "messenger boy. Running errands for Muhmenkeh. Bringing medicine. Washing dishes. Cleaning the sink" (*Beggar* 107). Lindner describes the "unreality" of watching Hellman perform these tasks "in his English clothes, sleeves rolled up—wearing Muhmenkeh's old, patched apron," calling him, at one point, "Sir Galahad armed in calico!" (107), and, eventually, despite the man's obvious lack of ability in the kitchen, he attempts the preparation of a meal. The rich bachelor is out of his element and, although he can "supervise the arrangements of the most elaborate entertainments" "without any fuss or feathers" (108-109; 108), he is "thrown into a panic when he [has] to attend personally to such small details as heating milk or toasting bread" (108).

Hellman is determined to provide for his charge, however, and as he brings his judicious, precise, and calculating manner to bear on the kitchen—the same manner, it is critical to note, with which he discharges his philanthropic duties—the culinary episode becomes an extended metaphor for the pair's conflicting views on charity. "How earnest, how conscientious he [is] in his awkwardness!" Adele exclaims while watching him cut bread (108). "With the profoundest of concentration," she reports,

he arranged . . . two slices on the toaster, lit the flame under the saucepan of milk. Then he began to level off a teaspoonful of salt, cutting it with a knife into a half, a quarter, an eighth, then meticulously dividing the eighth into a sixteenth.

“You’ll never make a cook,” I laughed. “You’re too conscientiously careful.”

“I have to be. . . . If I measure three grains of salt too much, I may halt our cure.”

“You’re so exact with the salt,” I warned, “you’re letting the toast burn.”

“There go my good intentions.” He seized the flaming slice, dropped it into the sink. Shaking the fork at me, he came over to my cot. “You’re not a good executive to permit such an incompetent in your service.”

“There—look!” I cried. “The milk is boiling over while you’re being impertinent to your boss. You’re fired.”

He rushed to the stove to save the milk. “I think a cook must be the cleverest person in the world.”

“It’s cleverer to hire someone to cook for you.”

“I think less of my education than I used to,” he apologized, setting the tray before me with painstaking solemnity. (108)

Underlying the playful banter and lighthearted tone of this conversation is a very real critique of Hellman’s methodology, as well as clues which hint at the charitable opinions of both participants. Lindner contends that Arthur is ““too conscientiously careful”” for his own good and, as is evinced by his failed attempt at cooking, the success of his endeavors suffers as a result. Such a criticism can also be leveled—indeed, *is* leveled by Adele earlier in the novel—at his family’s Home for Working Girls, where such rigid attention to detail results in a sterile, inflexible and rule-ridden environment which is ill-conducive to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of its occupants. Lindner, as we have seen, views such rigidity as stifling, and Arthur’s culinary fiasco provides tangible proof, in the form of scorched milk and flaming toast, that his method is faulty and yields dubious results. ““There go my good intentions,”” he remarks as the toast goes awry (108), apparently realizing that even actions with the most selfless of motives, if poorly or strictly executed, amount to nothing in the end. Subsequently, Hellman jokes that Lindner ““is not a good executive to permit such an incompetent in [her] service,”” thereby betraying one of his own philanthropic

beliefs: for the young millionaire, an organization is only as effective as its executives, and although the statement is made in jest, the implication is that, had Adele been a sterner and more demanding directive force, his own incompetence would have been stemmed – or, if necessary, his presence replaced with someone capable of doing the job effectively (indeed, to emphasize this point, Lindner ‘fires’ him near the end of the exchange). This is a principle that Hellman, his family, and their friends have liberally applied to the Home, and one that, judging by the debacle in Muhmenkeh’s kitchen, is not quite as effective as they have imagined it to be. The humility present in Arthur’s admission that he thinks less of his education than he used to is mirrored by the “painstaking solemnity” with which he sets the fruits of his labor in front of the sick woman. The rich, cultured philanthropist, so idolized by Lindner at the beginning of the novel, has come to realize that he can learn quite a bit from Adele, and his ability to laugh at his own ineptitude is refreshing.

This encounter, for all of its thinly veiled methodological critique and ‘rich, inept bachelor’ humor, shows that Hellman, as a character, is growing, for one can hardly imagine the Arthur Hellman we meet at the beginning of the novel preparing a meal for a sick immigrant in a dank East Side basement. Nor can the reader imagine that earlier Arthur playing with the dirty, raucous neighborhood children and letting them “‘scratch the milk pan’” with their spoons as he does after cooking for Adele in Muhmenkeh’s small flat (109). Hellman, to his credit, seems determined to try Lindner’s personal style of charity, and in this he is dramatically different from the majority of Yezierska’s upper-class American characters – but, typically, his approach is too rigid and methodical. If he could find a balance between his narrow, studied approach and Adele’s instinctive, ‘big picture’ emotional consciousness, the reader is led to believe, he would be successful in providing for the sick woman in a way that

leaves her fulfilled and grateful rather than upset, and this scene is poignant in the way that the characters use the cooking metaphor to discuss their differing points of view more calmly and frankly than they have elsewhere in the novel. Indeed, this decidedly domestic exercise seems to put the two at ease, Hellman's nervousness about his dubious culinary prowess notwithstanding, and allow them to connect in a fashion heretofore implausible while alluding to popular—and hotly debated—contemporary cultural theories such as the ubiquitous melting pot. Mary Simkhovitch, a progressive reformer and founder of New York's Greenwich House settlement, famously declared that the Lower East Side “was not a melting pot” but “a boiling kettle” (Simkhovitch 138), and this interpretation of the novel's setting seems apt in describing the tension felt by Lindner and Hellman elsewhere in the text, as well as hinting at the manner in which, in the aftermath of boiling, the contents of such a kettle can yield soothing results in the same way that this scene offers a modicum of relief from the constant stress inherent in their relationship with one another.

Nor does the characters' connection seem forced or stilted in this context like it does elsewhere in the novel, as out of the whole of the narrative it is in this scene that the two appear most human. It is during this exchange that the perennially guarded Hellman seems most open and accessible while, consequently, the emotionally volatile Adele seems most at ease in his presence, and by depicting her characters with their guard down, so to speak, Yezierska is encouraging the reader to imagine for a moment the changes in American philanthropy their meeting of minds—and hearts—might bring about if only they could sustain such dialogue. But, in the world the author constructs for us, such an understanding is not meant to last: Arthur's subsequent proposal of marriage is tinged with condescension despite his willingness to attempt Yezierska's ‘true’ charity, and Adele, who feels she “‘oughtn't

to be playing lady” with Hellman (*Beggar* 111), realizes that they will never be able to resolve their differences of opinion and forge a marriage based on equality and mutual respect as any attempt at union will be forever rooted in their prior, seemingly irreconcilable differences. “I’d never feel one of you—never one of the Hellmans,” she tells him (117);

“I’d never feel your equal even though I was, because I’d be smothered by your possessions. Your house, your cars, your servants, all the power that your money gives you over me. And you don’t feel I’m your equal, because, even now, you’re planning what you can do for me, what you can make of me[,] . . . not what I can do—what we can do together.” (117)

Lindner observes, just before Hellman proposes, that the man’s “his eyes [travel] over [her] with a glow of possession” (116), which lends credence to her assessment of their relationship. Arthur seems to view the woman as a possession—as someone he can mold, whose “personality . . . it would be a joy to help [make]” (115)—and Adele’s words on page 117 echo those of Sonya Manning, née Vrunsky, the protagonist of Yeziarska’s *Salome of the Tenements*, who becomes disillusioned with the life she procures for herself by effectively conning, and seducing, millionaire philanthropist John Manning. As we will see in Chapter Four, the former is never able to fully integrate into the family, social circle, or domestic hierarchy in the home of the latter, and she quickly discovers that the rosy, idealistic vision of privileged life—and of her husband—that she nurtured in the ghetto was nothing but a construct of her own imagination conceived, according to the narrator, “in that divine state of amorous illusion that no touch of reason [can] reach” (*Salome* 31). In this vein, Linder, in *Arrogant Beggar*, speaks of Hellman’s “frank, kindly face” and “new, impassioned” personality prior to the mention of marriage (112, 113) but realizes that the idealized version of the man she sought at the beginning of the novel does not

exist. “Where [is] the Arthur Hellman of my dreams?” she asks herself, “the tall, slender god with the shining light around his head that my illusion had created? This devoted Arthur Hellman[,] so eager to serve, to give of himself, [is] just a plain man” (114).

Adele’s epiphany about Arthur’s humanity foreshadows her imminent rejection of his proposal; for although Hellman, in his willingness to follow Lindner to the ghetto and admit that he “think[s] less of [his] education than [he] used to” (108), has given the appearance of learning from his mistakes, he continues to be frustratingly oblivious to the woman’s true needs and, by association, to the most basic needs of the poor whom he now seems so eager to help – hence Lindner’s observation that “this new, impassioned Arthur Hellman” is “just a man” in spite of his nascent fervor (113, 114). “Burning memories” of Adele’s time at the Hellman Home resurface (115) and she contends that Hellman followed her because he “‘couldn’t rest until [he] righted the wrong that had been done to [her]’” (116). “‘You *are* Sir Galahad,’” she says, recalling her earlier assessment of the man; “‘it’s not me you’re interested in. You’re only interested in being Sir Galahad’” (116). Arthur, in return, comments on Lindner’s “‘arrogance’” in refusing his overtures as “a wave of red mount[s] to his temples” (117). “‘Are you sure you’re not just playing a part from your romantic Russian novels?’” he asks, alluding to the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, “‘not just dramatizing yourself as one of the persecuted—one of the Insulted and the Injured?’” (117), and this question is the final nail in the coffin of their prospective relationship as Adele “shut[s] up completely” at its utterance (117). All understanding between the two has evaporated, its presence fleeting, and with it passes any hope of building a future together. Yet despite the finite nature of the cooking scene’s transcendent, bridge-building enlightenment (and, later, Hellman’s

awkward proposal), Yezierska once again demonstrates that her characters—be they male or female, Jewish or Gentile, European or American, rich or poor—require a combination of new world initiative and old world ideals to be truly happy and successful in life. Indeed, their happiness is almost completely dependent upon this synthesis, as is illustrated by Adele's attitude in the final stages of the novel; for while Yezierska uses Hellman's proposal to elucidate the frustratingly transient nature of such ideological alliances, she does not contend that they are completely impossible.

Portraying a more successful example of the unique brand of synthesis hinted at during Arthur's tenure as a chef in Muhmenkeh's basement (and displaying Yezierska's growing maturity as she presents both sides of the philanthropic debate more or less sympathetically), Adele and Jean Rachmansky—the pianist, formerly patronized by Arthur Hellman, whom Lindner marries—both recognize their debt to the Hellmans by the end of the novel and understand that the latter are not heartless. They are, the two lovers conclude, merely misguided, and although the family's efforts do not turn out the way that they have planned, they do result in a positive, if unintended outcome. After all, without the domestic training that she received at the Hellman Home, Lindner would not have been able to open Muhmenkeh's Coffee Shop and run it with such great success, nor, without the impetus of “the very inferiority which their kindness burned into [her],” would she have had the drive (140). Even the couple's introduction to one another is, they realize, a product of their association with the Hellmans. The philanthropists, though running their charitable endeavors in a fashion at odds with what Lindner and Rachmansky consider ideal, have endowed their institution with substantial sums of money in order to help the poor—money which could have been spent on other, more selfish pursuits—and the significance of the family's decision to invest part of their wealth in

agencies that they believe will better the lives of others is not lost on Adele. Realizing that they have received more from their erstwhile patrons than they had originally supposed (although not what their benefactors had intended for them, the millionaires' "well-meant[,] blundering efforts" having "gone deeper than their plans"; 142), Jean and Adele ruminate on the pain they have caused the Hellmans with their haughty ingratitude, as well as on the very nature of charity itself. "Why do we hurt people so?" Lindner asks her husband. "It is because we're . . . ingrates?" (140). Rachmansky responds by telling her that the Hellmans "gave [them] what they thought [they] ought to have. But we wanted something that no individual could give," he says,

something that we ourselves must wrest from life. The amazing thing . . . is that we expected so much from them and were hurt because it wasn't humanly possible for them to live up to our expectations. Just because they were kind to us, we demanded friendship, love, understanding, the very things they, with all their wealth, lacked. (140)

This statement strikes at the very heart of the fundamental misunderstanding created when two disparate charitable paradigms collide in the new world, and it displays a level of maturity and understanding, with regard to philanthropy, that had heretofore been largely absent from Yeziarska's work. By expounding thus, Jean Rachmansky, and the author herself, are considering events from the American benefactors' point of view as well as from their own and, in doing so, they come to the conclusion that they are as much to blame as anyone. The idea that Jean and Adele desire "something that no individual [can] give," and that it was never "humanly possible" for the Hellmans to live up to their expectations (140), is nothing short of a revelation. The author, in "Mostly About Myself," claims that "by writing out [her] protests and disillusion, [she] aired and clarified them. Slowly, [she] began to understand [her]

unreasoning demands upon America[,] and what America had to offer” (*How I Found America* 142), and the light of this realization dawns on her creations in *Arrogant Beggar*. “‘We’ve both been wicked, cruel to the Hellmans,’” Lindner tells Rachmansky (139); “‘if only the Hellmans knew how much we are indebted to them,’” the latter laments, for “‘they, who consciously tried to do so much for us that didn’t turn out right[,] . . . have [accidentally] done the deepest thing of all—brought us together. How grateful we are after all’” (142). The couple’s punishment for their prior ingratitude, it is stated, is living with the knowledge that they will never be able to explain their actions to their erstwhile patrons, but they take it upon themselves to “‘always remember how profoundly [the Hellmans] have helped [them]’” (140).

Acknowledging that a debt is owed to the Hellmans, that the philanthropic family is neither evil nor overtly predatory, and that part, if not most of the blame for the rift between benefactor and beneficiary rests, in this case, squarely on the shoulders of the latter, is, coming on the heels of Adele’s supreme disillusion, anger, and abandonment of the Home, a rather groundbreaking achievement for the character. As such, the plot’s conclusion strikes a seemingly optimistic chord comprising notes of forgiveness, repentance, thanksgiving and reconciliation, with the lovers—and, critically, the reader—feeling more sorry for the Hellmans than angry or indignant, and the idea that the protagonists will atone for their ingratitude is very important as well. Rather than simply blaming large, ‘soulless’ charitable entities for their demeaning mistreatment of lower-class and ethnic individuals, as she had done in previous works, Yezierska herein asserts that part of the problem is due to immigrants’ misconceptions and unrealistic expectations. In the novel’s final scene, Adele enters into the role of American benefactor as she and Rachmansky wait on the pier for Muhmenkeh’s granddaughter, Shenah Gittel, for whose transatlantic passage

the pair have paid, and the importance of providing the European girl with a steamship ticket and waiting nervously, expectantly, to welcome her to the new world is twofold.

On one hand, describing the now-married couple preparing for the arrival of Shenah Gittel at the conclusion of the narrative hints at the promise of a new generation of eastern European, Jewish-immigrant-descended Americans bringing balance, compassion, and understanding to U.S. philanthropy by combining those aspects of traditional charity with the most promising of their western counterparts' practices. This, then, is Yeziarska's characteristic hope for a fusion of cultural ideas which tempers the more extreme aspects of both paradigms and takes the best from each to create a new, stronger and more diverse whole. On the other hand, however, "defying genre expectations in the last paragraphs, the text suddenly moves from the florid language of the newlyweds' passion to Adele's disquieting admission of anxiety" and ends, as the lovers wait for the newcomer on the gangplank, "in a moment of suspended anticipation" (Stubbs Introduction xxxiv). Stubbs claims that "the young woman's face, appearing in the crowd, is in a sense the resurfacing of the social content of the novel, the return of what the novel's romantic formula appeared to repress with Adele and Jean's marriage" (xxxiv), and it is impossible to escape the fact that this scene also depicts Lindner and Rachmansky, both 'victims' of the Hellman's self-centered philanthropy, 'crossing over'—that is, transgressing in one of the most basic, literal senses of the word—into territory from which there can be no return. They cannot retract the offer of assistance which they have extended to Muhmenkeh's kin, nor can abandon it or pass its responsibility on to others; they can only attempt to avoid the harsh, arrogant, and impersonal modes of assistance that they have encountered in their own lives while offering genuinely compassionate and

unconditional support. And yet, one wonders if that will be enough, if Lindner's altruism will be accepted at face value, or if misunderstandings between benefactor and beneficiary will, as they have done in Adele's life, sour the woman's relationship with her ward. "[Lindner] can only watch and wait for young Shenah Gittel's inevitable ambivalence to this form of charity," Stubbs writes (xxxiv), and we can read the moment in which the newlyweds' romantic interlude is interrupted by "the resurfacing . . . social content of the novel" "as marking the site of Yezierska's struggle" wherein "she fashions an imperfect reconciliation between the novel's radical content and its conservative form." The power of the scene the author gives us at the end of the narrative rests in its "unsettling conclusion," which "ultimately eludes tidy categorization" and presents "striking evidence of the rich complexity that draws us in, again and again, to the work of Anzia Yezierska" (xxxiv). Responding to the author's claim that "'always see[ing] . . . two opposites at the same time'" (xxii) is her "'greatest tragedy in life'" (xxi-xxii), Stubbs contends that "in retrospect[,] this ability to see two sides of an issue appears not as a tragedy but as the primary source of her writing's complexity and strength" (xxii), and the conclusion of *Arrogant Beggar* stands as one of the most poignant examples of this involution extant in Yezierska's oeuvre.

Ultimately, although the writer seems to understand, if not agree with American philanthropy in the final pages of *Arrogant Beggar*, her characters going as far as acknowledging that the Hellman's "efforts" are "well-meant" and asserting that immigrants, due to their unrealistic expectations, are culpable in their own disillusionment (142), becoming a benefactor in the United States is portrayed as a dangerous endeavor which borders on futility. Acting on her desire to honor Muhmenkeh by funding her granddaughter's passage to America and, subsequently,

affording the young woman a place to stay in New York, Adele easily slips into a role that she has previously scorned, with her husband calling her a ““funny little philanthropist”” and remarking that she is ““walking nobly in the footsteps of Mrs. Hellman”” (151). ““Of course I am,”” Adele retorts (152), apparently unconcerned that she is ideologically aligning herself with a woman that she has, at various times, both idolized and abhorred. ““Poor Mrs. Hellman!”” she cries; ““she felt guilty for her wealth, and I feel guilty for being so happy”” (152). In this scenario, Adele’s guilt, rather than her altruism, induces her to provide for another, and, in attempting charity for the wrong reason, she becomes very like the woman against whom she has spent the preponderance of the novel rebelling. With this in mind, the young woman can be linked to *Salome of the Tenements*’ John Manning, another of Yezierska’s scathingly ineffectual philanthropists who, in the first scene of that novel, tells its protagonist, Sonya Vrunsky, that he is ““motivated by a sickly conscience”” that is ““trying to heal itself by the application of cold logic and cold cash”” (*Salome* 3). Dangerous, too, is the assumption that Lindner and Rachmansky will be able to provide for Shenah Gittel’s needs while ushering her into a American life: for, as Rachmansky has asserted, contemporary European immigrants frequently expected more from their U.S.-based benefactors than was ““humanly possible”” to give (*Beggar* 140). Reinforcing her husband’s point, Lindner asks ““what didn’t I expect from Mrs. Hellman[?]”” (152), and, although the training she received at the Hellman Home enables her to find her calling after the death of Muhmenkeh, her second benefactor, she remains skeptical of American charity’s ability to satisfy its beneficiaries’ needs while realizing that the recipients’ expectations are often too high to achieve fulfillment. Suddenly, Adele says, standing on the gangplank, ““a million little fears seized [her] at the responsibility [they] had undertaken”” (152), and her trepidation is

important because it stems from a feeling of inadequacy largely absent from traditional shtetl charity, it reinforces the pressure placed on American benefactors by their charges, and it stands in stark contrast to Rose Cohen's recollection of the happy, holiday-esque giving present during her childhood in Russia.

Echoing Rachmansky's revelation that he and his wife were, in effect, let down by the Hellmans' failure to live up unrealistic demands—and nervous about adequately providing for their forthcoming guest's needs—Lindner asks “how can we, being what we are, live up to the demands Shenah Gittel will make on us?” (152). “You little goose!” her husband playfully chides. “Of course we can't live up to all Shenah Gittel will expect. We can only give her the chance to get it for herself” (152-153). This statement, despite its promise of self-empowerment, has dire consequences for the author's vision of truly selfless, cross-cultural charity. Contained in Jean Rachmansky's words is the certainty that no matter what the newlyweds do for her, Shenah Gittel will want more; she will therefore, as Stubbs contends, fall prey to the “inevitable ambivalence” (Introduction xxxiv) of those who, like Adele, have come before her and sought too much of their benefactors, and this undermines any possible reading of the final scene in which Adele Lindner and Jean Rachmansky use what they've learned from their experiences with American charity to rewrite the western philanthropic paradigm into one that accommodates, edifies, and satisfies the needs, both physical and emotional, of eastern European immigrants because, as Rachmansky observes, what the immigrants need—self-sufficiency—cannot, by its very nature, be given.

Emblematic of such considerations is an instance earlier in the novel wherein Arthur Hellman attempts to buy the entire contents of Muhmenkeh's peddling basket, the price of which he purposefully overestimates in order to compensate the woman

for the sales she has lost while attending to Lindner's health. Adele remarks that "a worried look [comes] into [Muhmenkeh's] face" (110) as she considers the implications of the offer. "Why are you buying yourself so much tea and coffee?" the old woman asks; "the needles, the matches, the shoelaces. Are you maybe trying to do me a charity?" Arthur, of course, responds in the negative, but Muhmenkeh still refuses the sale. "No, Mister," she intones. "Your heart is good. But *Gott sei dank*, I got yet my hands and feet to earn me every cent" (110). In this revealing interaction, Hellman, the novel's embodiment of well-intentioned but poorly-executed philanthropy, attempts to aid Muhmenkeh, the representation of selfless, community-based charity, with what he considers a generous offer; however, in doing so he inadvertently insults her dignity and is, in consequence, gently rebuffed. The old woman, it seems, is proud of her autonomy, and the man's offer to pay her more than her goods are worth is one that she will not abide. "No," she responds, declining the extra money. "Only what's coming to me. A price is by me a price" (110). Thus true charity rejects pandering or being pandered to; it does not patronize and it resents *being* patronized; it resists being "beggared" by accepting handouts (112) and it relishes aid, like that provided by neighbors, which is offered without condescension. Ideally, according to Adele and Muhmenkeh's relationship, as well as to Lindner's tenure in the Hellman Home and her subsequent success on her own, true benevolence assists individuals in becoming independent and expects nothing in return; it does not insult dignity by assuming the inability or inferiority of the recipient, but rather encourages autonomy and self-sufficiency. In light of this assessment, both the IRO's endeavors to move Jewish immigrants to communities wherein there was the potential for economic independence and its staunch refusal to fund return trips to New York if

such independence were not attained seem to be more in line with traditional Jewish charity than many of its applicants originally assumed.

Muhmenkeh's peddling-basket exchange with Hellman elucidates their differing ideologies and, for the first time in the novel, pits the embodiments of old world and new world charity directly against one another as Arthur attempts to purchase the old woman's wares in magnanimous fashion. The placement of this scene in is important as well: Yeziarska presents it to the reader after Arthur has attempted to cook for Adele and, although Hellman's conception of charity is beginning to change, he remains a party to gross misunderstanding with those whom he seeks to help as, critically, he still fails to realize that money cannot furnish everything they need. Shortly after offending Muhmenkeh with his offer (although the dignified class of the woman's refusal, along with her observation that Hellman's "heart is good," assure the reader that the rift is not irreconcilable; 110), he compounds his ignorance in the eyes of the reader by offering to give Adele money with which she can replenish her caretaker's savings. "How can I forget that Muhmenkeh spent on me all [the] penny-to-a-penny savings she had hoarded for her grandchild?" Lindner asks, lamenting the fact that she is still not working after her long convalescence, and Arthur, undaunted by Muhmenkeh's refusal, mere moments before, of a similar offer for her peddling basket, responds that he will "write out a check" for "double, triple the amount" (111). "I can't pay her back with your cash," Adele retorts, reiterating the importance of self-sufficiency; "I must earn the money for her as she earned it." Yet what Adele sees as both an act of respect for the old woman's sacrifice and an assertion of her own independence Hellman decries as "sentimental nonsense! I have lots of money," he says. "More than I need. Why shouldn't you have some of it? Call it a loan. Don't let the bitter things that

happened to you make you hard,” he admonishes; ““don’t refuse the right kind of help”” (111). However, despite all that has occurred since the beginning of the novel—and in spite of his offhand remark that Adele can ““call it a loan””—it is clear that for Arthur Hellman ““the right kind of help”” is that which he has always offered: the liberal application of financial largesse. Arthur’s insistence on providing Lindner with the money to replenish Muhmenkeh’s savings is also significant in that it presages the tone of his proposal and reiterates that it is his desire to “help” Adele which leads him to entertain the thought of marriage (116), and in both cases his casual condescension is a fatal flaw which halts the process before it begins. Lindner calls the man “a prince bestowing favors with a full hand,” yet in the very next sentence claims that she feels “withered” and “beggared beside him” (112), and one assumes that the sentiment underlying her refusal of Arthur’s money is also present in her rejection of his proposal. “I’ve got to do it in my own way,” she says of earning the money to reimburse Muhmenkeh; ““I know now that I can never fly with borrowed feathers”” (112).

In the end, it is here, at the intersection of Muhmenkeh’s self-sufficient generosity, Lindner’s desire for autonomy, and Arthur’s stubborn, if well-intentioned ignorance, that the crux of the issue resides, and Rachmansky’s observation about the paradox inherent in the situation—the need for charities to provide something which immigrants must ““wrest from life”” of their own accord (140)—becomes key to understanding the story as a whole. The musician’s statement, coupled with the implications of the newlyweds’ charity toward Shenah Gittel in the final scene and “the resurfacing of the social content of the novel” which the young woman represents (Stubbs Introduction xxxiv), exposes for the reader the depth of Yeziarska’s frustration over the issue as well as laying bare the novel’s fundamental, unresolved

ambivalence. The cycle of misunderstanding, anger and indignation, the author seems to say, will continue unabated despite the lovers' honorable intentions in aiding Muhmenkeh's granddaughter – intentions which, like those of their American predecessors, will not be enough to satisfy the full range of demands placed on them by their charge. In effect, while Yezierska criticizes American institutional charity in *Arrogant Beggar* and provides, via the edifice of Muhmenkeh's Coffee Shop, her vision of a culturally integrated, community-centered solution to the problem, she also—with the inclusion of the final scene—seems to doubt America's, and Americans', ability to fully embrace and perpetuate such a solution with any degree of success. Nor was she alone, for, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, pursuing the cultural hybridity required to bridge the gulf between the old world and the new frequently resulted in a sort of split personality which precluded the reconciliation of cultures needed for a truly integrative future.

CHAPTER THREE

“The Destruction of My Temple”:²⁶

The Imperfection of Memory, Apostasy, and Education as New Religion

For late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Jews living in the Russian Pale of Settlement—and, indeed, for many of their Gentile counterparts living in similarly depressed conditions—America often became an idealized myth which encompassed freedom, wealth and equality, “a promised land, a paradise, and a gold-mine rolled into one” (Reczyńska 84). According to Ewa Morawska, “news about the ‘golden land’ was first spread through the East European countryside by agents of American employers (before contracting labor became officially outlawed by the U.S. government in 1885), who came seeking low-skilled workers for rapidly expanding heavy industries” (244), and rumors about it spread as the situation in the Pale worsened and peasants—Jewish or otherwise—were driven to migration by the harsh reality of their diminishing economic returns. “Once initiated by the interaction of [these] ‘pull’ and ‘push’ impulses,” Morawska reports, “travels from Eastern Europe to America soon became self-sustaining; the more people had gone before, the larger the flow grew, with relatives and friends following the pioneers in a pattern of chain-migration” (244) that lasted well into the twentieth century. In this expectant atmosphere, the steamship industry also “cultivated . . . a public relations effort mounted by U.S. companies” and encouraged emigration by sending “posters

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showing prices and sailing dates into even the smallest villages and including editorials and articles from . . . U.S. newspapers that extolled the prosperity of the United States” (Ewen 55). “One poster,” Ewen reports, describing the shameless nature of such propaganda, “distributed across Europe by the woolen companies of Lawrence, Massachusetts, depicted a mill on one side of the street, a bank on the other, and workers marching from one side to the other with bags of money under their arms” (55). Although such campaigns had their critics—“the Polish-language press,” for one, ascribed “the spread of an exaggerated and stereotyped image of America . . . to the German agents of the shipping companies” and “accused [them] of luring naive peasants into emigration” (Reczyńska 84), while in Italy “emigrant agents” were “called swindlers and slave dealers” (Rosoli 227)—the vision of the United States that they purveyed became rooted in the collective imagination of the eastern European poor and engendered a “belief that America was the peasant El Dorado” (Morawska 245). Frequently composed by immigrants caught up in the excitement of the new world’s financial opportunities, letters sent back to Europe by those who had emigrated exacerbated the aggrandizement of the American labor market and encouraged such mythologizing.

Anna Reczyńska notes that “the image of America adopted by Polish peasants emerged under the influence of letters written by relatives, friends or neighbors [living] in the United States” as “they were treated as the most reliable sources of information” (87) and Gianfausto Rosoli identifies a similar pattern in contemporary Italy—another major source of new immigration—when he reports that “the popular images of the New World were spread by oral and written means within the family and village. Of particular importance,” he writes, noting the diversity of the ideological onslaught, “are letters, autobiographies, and diaries of migrants, popular

travel literature, and emigrant guides printed by emigrant agents, all of which contributed to the myths about America” (224). While the concept of a legendary ““golden land”” (Morawska 244) was perpetuated in numerous ways across a variety of media, the centrality of personal correspondence to both its construction and popularity is readily apparent – for, as Rosoli is quick to point out, the ““lettera Americana,”” as it was dubbed in Italy, was “a leading factor stimulating exodus” (226).²⁷ In Poland, epistles “comparing immigrant laborers’ earnings with those obtained at home” (Morawska 245) often contained “photographs of well-fed and urbanely dressed ‘Amerikanci’” for emphasis and ““American Fever”” in the region was fuelled by over three million letters from the United States between 1900 and 1906 alone (245). For Jews in the old world the ritual circulation of post-emigration correspondence became so woven into the fabric of *shetl* life that it inevitably made its way into American immigrant-penned fiction as part of the larger trope of transatlantic relocation: Anzia Yezierska, for example, depicts scenes in which letters from the new world are passed amongst Polish townsfolk in *Hungry Hearts*’ “The Miracle” and “How I Found America,” and it is important to note that these narrative interludes, which are unique in that the author rarely chooses to portray action taking place in Europe rather than the United States, are still dominated by the specter of America despite their continental settings. Cahan’s David Levinsky, too, recalls that in his Russian hometown of Antomir “hundreds of . . . inhabitants were going to America or planning to do so” (*Levinsky* 61); “letters full of wonders from emigrants already there went the rounds of eager readers and listeners until they were worn to

²⁷ Rosoli also asserts that after an initial period of intense mythopoetic activity in the late-nineteenth century letters from Italian immigrants contributed to the dismantling of the legend they had helped create as, for good or ill, “the image of the New World was no longer an abstract or remote one” and “the real condition of Italian emigrants began to emerge from the communications received” (228). This situation, according to Morawska, “mirrors the experience[s] of Polish, Ukrainian, Rusyn [*sic*], Hungarian, and Yugoslav peasant migrants” (248).

shreds in the process.” Indeed, it is one of these letters that plants the idea of emigration firmly in David’s head, the young man “haunted . . . ever after” by the “concrete details” of the missive which “gave New York tangible form in [his] imagination” (61).

Ultimately, despite the hyperbolic riches and glamour presented in such epistles—and in the propagandistic advertising of American industry—the United States meant one thing for downtrodden peasants living in eastern European communities: opportunity. Although this opportunity took many forms in the new world—the promise of economic ascendance, the hope of escaping organized religious persecution and, for many single women whose traditional roles, as we have seen, dictated marriage and motherhood, visions of exponentially increased romantic and matrimonial prospects, many of whom were outside of the strictly patriarchal orthodox tradition—many new immigrants became enamored of its intellectual opportunities and pursued education as fervently as a new religion upon their arrival in the United States. As this chapter will show, such endeavors came at a cost as immigrants’ and native-born Americans’ academic ideals were set at odds with one another, with the result that pursuing higher education in the U.S. habitually distanced eastern European students from their peers while effacing previously fundamental aspects of their identity. Mary Antin, whose paean to Americanization, *The Promised Land*, often runs the risk of selective, if not revisionist memory, is nonetheless useful in this regard due to her treatment of education from both the immigrant and American points of view. The author’s text views academic achievement as the main conduit through which successful assimilation can occur, and the book thus acts as a sort of encomium to the American educational process by which Antin herself claims to have been acculturated. Though in all probability a grandly hyperbolized

occurrence meant to emphasize the United States' academic possibilities (elsewhere in the text, Antin says she is "wearily aware that [she is] speaking in extreme figures, in superlatives," when she announces that "the apex of [her] civic pride and personal contentment was reached on the bright September morning when [she] entered . . . public school"; 157), the writer manages to sum up the hopes and dreams of a great number of immigrants when she notes that "education," "that subject [her] father had written about repeatedly . . . as comprising his chief hope for [his] children, the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, [nor] . . . misfortune or poverty" elide, "was free" (148) in the "pleasant nursery of America" (143). Although this statement is extravagant in its own right, the main hyperbole of this portion of the text comes as Antin uses her father's optimistic view of education to segue into her own. She claims that it "was the one thing . . . he was able to promise us when he sent for us; surer, safer than bread or shelter" (148), and recalls that

on our second day [in the United States] I was thrilled with the realization of what this freedom of education meant. A little girl from across the alley came and offered to conduct us to school. My father was out, but we five [family members] [had] between us . . . a few words of English by this time. We knew the word school. We understood. This child, who had never seen us till yesterday, who could not pronounce our names, who was not much better dressed than we, was able to offer us the freedom of the schools of Boston! No application made, no questions asked, no examinations, rulings, exclusions; no machinations, no fees. The doors stood open for every one of us. The smallest child could show us the way. (148)

Antin later intimates that this view of the siblings' circumstances is overly idealistic when she admits that her elder sister's abnegative forfeiture of academic instruction in favor of a life spent "bent over [a] sewing-machine humming an Old-World melody" as a laborer (158) is one of the primary factors which makes Mary's new world education a viable possibility—and this realization is one of a number of bittersweet

revelations regarding her family's sacrificial support which she recounts in the course of her narrative—so one wonders if such philosophical musings are presented to the reader purely for dramatic effect. Nevertheless, when she embarks on her journey through “the Elysian Fields of liberal learning” (161) the author proclaims that “[she] never heard of any one [*sic*] who was so watched and coaxed, so passed along from hand to helping hand, as was [she]” (169), which stands in stark contrast to the accounts of protagonists in books like those written by Anzia Yezierska. She writes that she “walked on air” when she was “promoted to grammar school” “to learn out-of-the-way things, things that had nothing to do with ordinary life—things to *know*” (170), for it is then, she states, that she is “a *student*,” “not merely a school-girl learning to spell and cipher.” She confides that she often “carried home half the books in [her] desk, not because [she] should need them, but because [she] loved to hold them; and also because [she] loved to be seen carrying books. It was a badge of scholarship, and [she] was proud of it” (170). Sean Butler contends that “education is one of Antin’s most coveted and conspicuous possessions” (64), which can easily be surmised in light of her affected habit of conveying schoolbooks to and from the classroom, because “it is . . . a property which separates the intellectual Antin from Antin the ‘ignorant child of the ghetto’ and from all other immigrants with, in her words, ‘minds cramped by centuries of oppression in their native land’”²⁸ (Butler 65). This is an important point which emphasizes the acquisition of relevant intellectual capital as being a pivotal investment in one’s acculturative potential, and Antin, in addition, touches on the historical significance of education as a relatively safe and resilient resource when she describes her father’s conviction that it is “the [one] treasure that no thief [can] touch,” nor “misfortune [and] poverty” destroy (Antin 148).

²⁸ Antin 144

In “The Economics of Diaspora: Discrimination and Occupational Structure,” Reuven Brenner and Nicholas Kiefer examine this concept in detail by identifying its possible impetus and discussing American Jews’ tendency “to be more highly educated and to choose a narrower range of occupations” than the polity at large (517); they observe that one popular hypothesis regarding this phenomenon posits that “Jews, compared to the rest of the population, [have traditionally] invested relatively more heavily in human than physical capital because human capital is more portable and difficult to confiscate than physical capital” (518). “A discriminated-against group,” they write,

which has had physical capital confiscated in the past might tend to take the probability of confiscation of an asset into consideration when making an investment. Further[more], a group which had been compelled to emigrate from a country might take the portability of an asset into consideration when making an investment in a new country, especially if it continues to face discrimination. (518)

After addressing such phenomena at length, the authors conclude that “even if the risk of confiscation is no longer taken into consideration, a once-discriminated-against group will invest more in human capital relative to the rest of the population due to the intergenerational effect” (522), which is supported by Antin’s father’s insistence on educating his children such that “no thief [can] touch” their intellectual investments (Antin 148).

Of course, though the practicality of education as a resource not easily stripped from one’s possession is pertinent given the history of Jewish persecution in Europe, many immigrants’ passion for learning is unsurprising given that, for Jews, religion and education are intimately linked. “In the traditional world of the nineteenth-century Eastern European Jew,” writes Sydney Weinberg, “learning was prized above wealth, and religious scholarship was the most prestigious pursuit a man could undertake” (71), which statement inscribes the commensurability, for males, of

Judaism and education. *The Rise of David Levinsky* uses this paradigm to great effect when describing the titular character's precocious childhood: "the compliments that were paid my brains," Levinsky reminisces, "were ample compensation for my mother's struggles. Sending me to work was out of the question. She was resolved to put me in a Talmudic seminary" and "make a 'fine Jew' of me. Nor was she a rare exception in this respect, for there were hundreds of other poor families in our town who would starve themselves to keep their sons studying the Word of God" (23). As Cahan insinuates with his protagonist's history, Talmudic and rabbinical studies were, in the Pale of Settlement, the order of the day. To become a rabbi was something to which many young boys aspired as it was considered the very height of society and the noblest of pursuits; Rose Cohen, for instance, says that her younger brother, even at age six, "looked upon himself as one of the future great Rabbis" (20), and by the age of seven "he is so pious that he wishes to remain with a learned Jew in Russia, after [his] mother goes to America, that he may become a great Rabbi" (79). Having studious individuals in the family pursuing such a path was seen as a great blessing, but it was also a source of jealousy. At home, religious students were often spoiled with the best food, considered exempt from performing household chores or laboring in full-time jobs, and were given as much privacy as circumstances allowed in which to further their education. In an atmosphere where physical drudgery, hunger, and cramped, overcrowded living conditions were almost universal, such perks were considered luxuries that aroused the envy and ire of other family members despite the traditional view that supporting a scholar brought the family prestige in this life and honor in the next. In the greater community, religious study was also a frequent source of enmity and competition between socially ambitious mothers who fought with each other over their children's educations, each desiring that their boys would

rise to great spiritual heights and living out their own dreams of piety and respect through their offspring even as they themselves were frustrated and marginalized by the religion they encouraged their children to pursue. David's mother illustrates this point when, walking past a bookstore with her son, she points "at some huge volumes of the Talmud" and declares that "'this is the trade I am going to have you learn, and let our enemies grow green with envy'" (23).

To truly understand the kind of education a young Jewish man would have admired or aspired to in Eastern Europe, one must first have an idea of what is encompassed by a Talmudic course of study. "What is the Talmud?" Levinsky asks as an introduction for the non-Jewish reader. It is "a voluminous work of about twenty ponderous tomes," "the bulk of [which] is taken up with [the] debates of ancient rabbis" (28).

It is primarily concerned with questions of conscience, religious duty, and human sympathy—in short, with the relations "between man and God" and those "between man and man." But it practically contains a consideration of almost every topic under the sun, mostly with some verse of the Pentateuch for a pretext. All of which is analyzed and explained in the minutest and keenest fashion, discussions on abstruse subjects being sometimes relieved by an anecdote or two, a bit of folklore, worldly wisdom, or small talk. Scattered through its numerous volumes are priceless gems of poetry, epigram and story-telling. (28)

The notes to a recent edition of Cahan's masterpiece describe it, rather more succinctly, as "a compilation of Jewish Oral Law with rabbinical commentaries, elucidations, and elaborations, as distinguished from the Scriptures, or Written Law" (Irving 520), and these volumes, alongside the Torah, or "Written Law," formed the core of Jewish studiousness, the absolute backbone of male education, in traditional Eastern European Jewish culture. Illustrating just how integral it is to an orthodox male's education, the word 'Talmud' is literally the "Hebrew word meaning 'learning' or 'study'" (520), and for a traditionally pious Jew this appellation is

neither an understatement nor an oversimplification; it is, in fact, the most apt description imaginable for Levinsky's "ponderous tomes." However, Rachel Friedberg observes that "human capital is imperfectly portable across countries" (246), and, due to the fact that "the national origin of an individual's human capital is a crucial determinant of its return" (223) ("foreign human capital," she notes, "often—though not always—earns a lower return than domestic human capital"; 222), education in the United States was an entirely different story. Critically, Friedberg notes, "the portability of education depends on its level or configuration, in terms of type and source" (223), and, as is the case when Mary Antin states that her father's "precious learning [is] of no avail" in America "because he ha[s] only the most antiquated methods of communicating it" (Antin 161), as a European mode of religious instruction a Talmudic education's "type and source" (Friedberg 223) were both disadvantageous in the United States' contemporary intellectual milieu.

In the old world, Jews accounted such study the highest form of scholarship possible in either religious or secular education—Levinsky, for example, recalling his youth, says that it is "as much a source of intellectual interest as an act of piety" (28)—and it was a mark of pride, a badge of honor representing the religious piety of not just the individual, but of the entire family, which frequently took the form of a fulltime occupation. Not so in the new world. Whereas in Russia a learned Jewish man was one who was familiar with the both the Torah and the Talmud and advanced Talmudic scholars were among the most revered figures in the Jewish community—a community in which "to read these books, to drink deep of their sacred wisdom, is accounted one of the greatest 'good deeds' in the life of a Jew" (28)—American educational ideals were quite dissimilar, as is evidenced when the newly-arrived Levinsky answers a question about his trade by responding that he "'read[s] Talmud'"

(91) and receives a rebuke stating that ““that’s no business in America.”” David’s conception of traditional Jewish studiousness, which constitutes gainful employment, conflates mental acuity, religious identity and social culture—“if it be true that our people represent a high percentage of mental vigor,” he muses, “the distinction is probably due, in some measure, to the extremely important part which Talmud studies have played in the spiritual life of the race” (28)—but it is important to note that he only speaks of Talmudic study in this manner when he reminisces about his childhood in Russia, so his explanations are tinged with the nostalgia of decades-old memories. While recounting his childhood experiences in the local synagogue, he claims that the Talmud

is at once a fountain of religious inspiration and a “brain-sharpener.” “Can you fathom the sea? Neither can you fathom the depths of the Talmud,” as we would put it. We were sure that the highest mathematics taught in the Gentile universities were child’s play as compared to the Talmud. (28)

However, after young David moves to New York City, his perception of such scholarship shifts. As an older narrator he states that “a Talmudic education was until recent years practically the only kind of education a Jewish boy of old-fashioned parents received” (28), and in so doing he reveals a bias held by many Jewish-American immigrants. David Levinsky, speaking after years in America, has by the time he makes this declaration succumbed to a more American view of education which holds that superior education belongs to the secular world of night schools and “Gentile universities” where religion, if it exists at all, takes the form of Christian, and usually Protestant, modes of inquiry. Although, as narrator, he seems to accord religious education an elevated position that is timeless in its dedication to transcendent spiritual ideals, especially when he references his childhood at the beginning of the novel, when Cahan’s protagonist expounds upon its merits his

discourse is almost always set in recollected locales. This aspect of the narration simultaneously, and in no uncertain terms, ties such education to Eastern Europe while relegating it to the distant past of memory; the reader, then, given the Russian setting of these expository diversions, realizes that Talmudic education is in effect bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, if not the Russian border, and appropriate only for a specific place and time which is decidedly *not* the here and now.

Cahan had previously touched on similar themes in “The Imported Bridegroom” (1898) when that story’s main character, Asriel Stroon, after thirty-five years in America, begins to yearn for the idyllic hometown of his youth which he has all but forgotten “in the whirl of his American successes” (99). Stroon, in his advancing age, has become pious, much to the chagrin of his American-born daughter, Flora, and longs for the hamlet of his birth because it is intimately linked to the Judaism of his past. With this scenario, Cahan subtly reinforces two important points: that new world piety is inherently and inevitably different from old world piety, and that true, traditional Judaism is inextricably linked—and, quite possibly, only truly feasible in—old world settings. For despite the “numerous . . . examples of piety within the range of [Asriel’s] American acquaintance, his notion of genuine Judaism [is] somehow inseparably associated with [his hometown of] Pravly” (99). Indeed,

during all the years of his life in New York he had retained a vague but deep-rooted feeling that American piety was as tasteless an article as American cucumbers and American fish—the only things in which his ecstasy over [his] adopted country admitted its hopeless inferiority to his native town. (99)

Spurred on by the emotions elicited by chanting psalms in a language he does not understand, Stroon makes a pilgrimage to Poland to try and recapture the religious identity of his younger days. As he nears Pravly in the back of a peasant’s wagon his “soul burst[s] into song” and his senses, overcome by sensation and memory, are

confused; he “[beholds] a sea of fragrance,” “inhales[s] heavenly music” and pointedly declares that a nearby field is “praying” (100), which hyperbolically elucidates his belief that even the Polish countryside itself reverently observes local religious customs. He notices flowers “swaying thoughtfully hither and thither” and, not surprisingly, “the whole scene appeal[s] to his soul as a nodding, murmuring congregation engrossed in the solemnity of worship” (100). References to Asriel’s memories of tangible and sensual experiences—the recollected taste of his homeland’s fish and produce, for example—and the sight, in Poland, of flowers that mimic, in his mind, a religious gathering reify Pravly’s Judaism as a palpable, almost material entity; they give it form, texture and essence similar to that of more concrete articles such as the local flora and fauna and liken it to something which has literal roots in the native soil and nourishes those who partake of it. Judaism, in Pravly, is a vibrant, living thing, a product of the land as far removed from the “tasteless,” or bland and unfulfilling ‘piety’ of New York as the Pale is from the east coast of the United States. Stephanie Foote notes that, in general, “the temporal disposition of identity for an ethnic subject resembles the spatial disposition of the reified national subject in the late nineteenth century” (35), which is certainly the case for Stroon, and the fact that “the world of his past and the world of his present” both seem “complete and unchangeable” (35) adds to his crisis of identity as he realizes, perhaps on a subconscious level, that the two cannot successfully be combined because each somehow exists independent of the other. In effect, the “renewed yearning” for his homeland which drives Asriel to visit rural Poland, “elicited and framed by a Hebrew prayer, is not only for his youth, but for his lost identity as a Jew” (38). What Richard Rodriguez would later call the *Hunger of Memory* results in Stroon’s longing for a location which is both analogous to and representative of the immigrant’s former

life—an “always-elsewhere space of the past,” as Foote puts it (39)—because his “sense that ‘real’ Judaism is the Judaism of his former home” leads him to believe “that his ‘real’ self is in Pravyly as well” (38). This is a recurring theme in Cahan’s work, and Stroon shares this belief with David Levinsky, who states, as early as the first paragraph of his narration in the novel that bears his name, that his “inner identity,” which is somehow different and more authentic than his identity as an American “cloak-and-suit” millionaire, is “precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago,” before his immigration to the United States (3). The so-called “fervor of [Stroon’s] religious awakening,” which might in itself be no more than a manifestation of maudlin pining for a nostalgic and unobtainable past, “resolder[s] the long-broken link” to the character’s native land (Cahan “Bridegroom” 99) and acts as a catalyst for the rest of the story’s action as, like its title suggests, he travels to Europe and arranges for a local Talmudic scholar to accompany him back to the United States in order to marry his daughter.

Like Levinsky, who at the end of his tale indulges in brooding hindsight, Asriel Stroon reflects on his life and laments the loss of some elusive quality, fundamentally tied to the home of his youth, that somehow defines who and what he is. The loss of this amorphous, ethereal, yet somehow undeniably definitive aspect of identity apparently occurs during the process of migration and cultural assimilation, no matter how limited that assimilation may be, and it cannot be recovered simply by returning to religion, as evidenced by Stroon’s late-life piety, which is a product of his fear of death (“Bridegroom” 98) and leaves him desirous of the sort of religious experiences he remembers having as a child. Realistically, Stroon here desires the impossible, not least because the old world and the new seem to be—for the protagonist, at least—mutually exclusive, as is illustrated upon the character’s return

from Poland when “the nearer [he] . . . [comes] to New York, the deeper . . . Pravly sink[s] into the golden mist of romance, and the more real . . . the great American city grow[s] in his mind. Every mile,” relates the narrator, “add[s] detail to the picture, and every new detail [makes] it dearer to his heart” (119), which alludes to the fact that the character can only inhabit, both mentally and physically, one location—and one culture—at a time. In addition, Stroon, according to the text, does not actually remember Pravly and its Judaism before he revisits them; he recalls only the “reminiscences” of them (100) to which he fell prey “when he would surrender to the sweet pangs of homesickness” in New York and “dwell, among other things, on the view that had seen him off to the unknown land” across the Atlantic (100-101). Thus Asriel is removed from the original location, and identity, of his childhood by several layers of recollection as he remembers homesick memories of it rather than recalling the town itself. As Sanford Marovitz put it in 1968, Stroon, like so many of Cahan’s creations, is fundamentally unable to reconcile “the charming dream of the past with the painful and banal activities of the present” (“Lonely New Americans” 200), and, subsequently, the conflict between memory and reality taints every aspect of the character’s return to his mother country as these superimposed screens of memory are removed, which, rather than confirming his identity or allowing him to reconnect with his roots, exacerbates the protagonist’s emotional and intellectual disassociation from his ‘true,’ ‘original’ self. “‘Who are you?’” Asriel “almost” asks himself on the road to Pravly (Cahan “Bridegroom” 101) before catching a glimpse of a fine dwelling and recalling its importance—and, significantly, a part of his own identity—by declaring that it is “the nobleman’s palace, as sure as I am a Jew!” (102). The character’s outburst alludes to a ‘forgotten’ sense of self and the narration follows suit and reiterates, in the following sentence, the significance of Stroon’s lapse in memory,

and its ramifications for his identity, by stating that “he had forgotten all about it, as sure as he was a Jew!”

Rediscovering his identity is not, however, for Asriel Stroon, as simple as recalling something lost to the fog or “golden romance” of memory (119) after decades of separation, as is demonstrated by his encounter with the town of Pravly itself. Despite his claims that he knows his hometown “better than Mott Street,” on which he lives in New York, and “better than [his own] nose” (97), when he reaches the village he realizes that there are parts of it “which [have] faded out of his enshrined picture of the place” (102) and he encounters aspects of the hamlet which are not as he remembers them, such as the alley behind Synagogue Lane, which, in the intervening years, has in his mind turned perpendicular to its original direction (102-103). The narration states that

everything [is] the same as he had left it; and yet it all ha[s] an odd, mysterious, far-away air—like things seen in a cyclorama. It [is] Pravly and at the same time it [is] not; or, rather, it certainly [is] the same dear old Pravly, but added to it [is] something else, through which it now gaze[s] at Asriel. (103)

That mysterious “something else,” of course, is time, for “thirty-five years,” the narrator reports, “lay wrapped about the town” (103), which is also true of the unique personal identity that Stroon hopes to reclaim by returning to it. On the journey through the countryside, the character begins to refer to himself in the third person—or, more accurately, to refer to his younger self as a separate entity—as he is inspired, by the sight of certain rocks, fields and brooks, to reminisce about specific incidents from his past, and the hope, once he is in the town or Pravly itself, is that these two entities will be reconciled, but this is not to be the case. Although, briefly, “Stroon feels like Asrielke Thirteen Hairs, as his nickname had been,” “he relapses into the

Mott Street landlord, and for a moment he is an utter stranger in his birthplace” (103): Asriel Stroon the New Yorker encroaches upon the rural setting and his “idealized, almost timeless vision of Pravly . . . [is] crowded out by his importation of New York customs” as he attends a service in the synagogue and barbers for a son-in-law (Foote 38-39). The character’s experience with the town of his birth mirrors his inner struggle as “his heart swells with exultation” at being ‘home’ while it simultaneously “yearns and aches” for something different (Cahan “Bridegroom” 103); Stroon “looks at Pravly, and his soul is pining for Pravly—for the one of thirty-five years ago—of which [the present village] is only a reflection” (103).

The imperfection of memory is not a new or unique concept, but it is one that recurs often in immigrant writing, be it fiction, memoir, or somewhere in between, especially with regard to one’s childhood in another country. Mary Antin, for example, though somewhat notorious for her rose-tinted view of acculturation, states in *The Promised Land* (1912) that “[her] father and mother could tell [her] much more that [she has] forgotten, or that [she] was never aware of,” but she prefers to forgo such resources and “reconstruct [her] childhood” for the reader only “from those broken recollections . . . which, recurring to [her] in after years, filled [her] with the pain and wonder of remembrance” (65). Antin’s approach, which eschews corroboration and relies solely on her own recollection of events, means that there are likely to be factual errors in her text, but she does not skirt the issue of her reliability—or unreliability—as a narrator. Indeed, what makes her version of the events of her life so interesting, and relevant to the current subject, is the fact that she openly addresses the issues of nostalgic memory and identity which frustrate Asriel Stroon in “The Imported Bridegroom.” Like Stroon, Antin suffers from a disjuncture between her prior and present selves, which is illustrated by her claim that she wants

to “string together . . . glimpses of [her] earliest days” in order to “show [her] an elusive little figure that is [herself], and yet so much a stranger to [her]” that she is forced to ask “can this be I?” (65). Showing a remarkable amount of insight regarding the romanticization of the past that helps facilitate such feelings of estrangement, the immigrant candidly writes that she “[has] not much faith in the reality of [her] first recollection,” which is of her maternal grandfather’s body laid out for burial in Polotzk,²⁹ and, after recounting some specific details attending the incident, asks “do I really remember this little scene?” She acknowledges that she might have “heard it described by some fond relative, as [she] heard other anecdotes of [her] infancy, and unconsciously incorporated it with [her] genuine recollections” (65) and admits that she includes it in her work because “it is so suitable a scene for a beginning” due to its “darkness,” “mystery” and “impenetrability.” Finally, in a surprising display of authorial transparency—and self-awareness—Antin confesses that, although the tableau may have occurred the way she has described it, “it is more likely” that “later on, when [she] sought . . . a First Recollection,” she “elaborated the scene, and [her] part in it, to something that satisfied [her] sense of dramatic fitness” (65-66).

Like Cahan, Antin also uses the archetypal ‘place of birth’ to represent the concept of memory and a former, pre-emigration identity, and her grandfather’s house, in which she was born, becomes the departure point for ruminations on the nature of retrospective reality. She observes that “the abode of [one’s] childhood, if not revisited in later years, is apt to loom in [one’s] imagination as a vast edifice with immense chambers” (66), which attests to the human tendency for exaggeration and aggrandizement when it comes to recollected actions and settings, but claims that

²⁹ Polotzk, sometimes spelled Polotsk, is a town in the Vitsebsk Voblast province of modern Belarus and the site of Antin’s childhood prior to her family’s emigration.

“somehow [she has] failed of this illusion,” which is meant to subtly underscore her credibility as narrator who does not succumb to hyperbole or overstatement – however, she subsequently undermines that credibility of her own accord. Because she was so young, the author does not remember much about the interior of the house in which she spent her early years, the one exception being a window in a particular room and, more importantly, the view of the “narrow, walled garden” outside it. Describing the “deep-red dahlias” that grew in the garden, which belonged to the family’s Gentile neighbors, Antin reports that she has since “been told that they were not dahlias at all, but poppies” (66), which occasions a diversion to discuss her Stroon-like memorial inaccuracy. “As a conscientious historian,” she writes,

I am bound to record every rumor, but I retain the right to cling to my own impression. Indeed, I must insist on my dahlias, if I am to preserve the garden at all. I have so long believed in them, that if I try to see *poppies* in those red masses over the wall, the whole garden crumbles away, and leaves me a gray blank. (66)

“I have nothing against poppies,” she declares; “it is only that my illusion is more real to me than reality” (66). While such an assertion undercuts the factual accuracy of her biography, it fosters credibility of another sort by establishing that the writer is aware of her imperfect memory. By confessing this imperfection to her readers, Antin reveals her true intention to them as well; she does not seek to mislead her audience by purporting to recount every event in her past with perfect accuracy despite the human mind’s inescapable inability to accurately record, and recall at will, every detail of a given scene, but to impart a more general impression of life as lived in the tensioned space characterized by transition between conflicting cultures. Antin’s disclosure thus furthers her ultimate goal of writing about a “universal life,” which she considers “typical of many” immigrants (2), by allowing her to construct a

story based on ‘higher’ truths rather than on the minutiae of her own existence: instead of focusing on the complete veracity of the details of her upbringing and subsequent immigration to America, Antin admits to presenting a narrative centered on the overarching truth of her experience as “illustrative of scores of unwritten lives” (2), which is reminiscent of Thomas More’s famous claim, made in a letter to Peter Giles frequently printed as a preface to *Utopia*, that in reporting on the society and customs of the fictitious Utopians he would “rather be truthful than correct” (More 5). It has also led some critics to call Antin’s work “a novelistic autobiography” (Sollors xiv) or, like Gert Buelens and Magdalena Zaborowska, who writes that because “Antin dissociates herself so clearly from her work and from its subject matter” “a careful reader” recognizes “that *The Promised Land* should not be read as a simple document of immigrant experience, but as a work of fiction in which the politics of female authorship in general and of autobiography in particular are interrogated” (Zaborowska 51), to treat it “as if it were a novel” (Sollors xiv).

In the end, like Asriel Stroon in “The Imported Bridegroom,” Mary Antin—or at least the character of ‘Mary Antin’ who narrates her ‘autobiography’—retains two separate and distinct personalities, those of an eastern European peasant and an urbanized American immigrant, which is facilitated by the division between memory and history. Indeed, at the very beginning of her tale the writer declares that she “is as much out of the way as if [she] were dead, for [she is] absolutely other than the person whose story [she has] to tell” (Antin 1). She claims that she “can speak in the third person and not feel that [she is] masquerading,” such is the difference between her present and former selves (1), much the way Stroon, during his trip to Pravly, speaks of his younger self as if he were another person. Although Antin’s memoir of acculturation was published twelve years into the twentieth century—fourteen years

after Cahan's novella, and five years before the publication of *David Levinsky*—both describe “longing through the rhetoric of [the] late nineteenth-century commodification of memory and nostalgia” and make use of “popular [contemporary] scenes of return and memory” (Foote 39) in order to call attention to the divided character of ethnic Americans, and both Antin and Stroon attempt to use education to become who, or what, they wish to be. The author, as we will see, uses it to acculturate after immigrating and to assert her new American identity, while Cahan's protagonist tries to use it, by proxy, to reclaim his earlier, eastern European identity. The latter attempt, it should be noted, fails spectacularly. Ultimately, Stroon attempts to revive his younger, perhaps more quintessentially ‘Jewish’ personality by invoking traditional Jewish cultural identity in the form of Shaya Golub, the titular bridegroom who is recruited—or, rather, bought—and taken to America to wed Flora, Asriel's daughter, but his plan backfires, resulting in Shaya's complete secularization (or, as Asriel might put it, his apostasy) and driving his family apart in the process. Stroon's actions are flawed—they are selfish (he has no son and, because of his advancing age and recently returned piety, he is desperate for someone to recite *Kaddish*, a Jewish prayer for the dead, for him after he has died), they are naïve (he assumes that Shaya will not succumb to the same cultural forces which caused him to abandon his own religious leanings after immigrating to the United States), and, in a disturbing display of arrogance, impiety, and self-righteous cultural imperialism, they are plied capitalistically (he commodifies, bids for and, ultimately, buys a European fiancé for his daughter on the Sabbath, a day during which Jews are forbidden from conducting financial transactions)—but the most important aspect of their execution is the fact that he chooses Shaya because the youth is renowned as a promising Talmudic scholar.

Golub, at the beginning of Cahan's tale, is not so much a character as an archetype: he is the personification of a traditional Jewish religious education, a "benchmark immigrant" (Joseph 9) who represents the very pinnacle of erudite, respectable, and dignified old world Judaism. He is a brilliant "*illoui*," or "prodigy of Talmudic lore," who can outdebate "the subtlest rabbinical minds in the district" (Cahan "Bridegroom" 105), and, illuminating both his physical and metaphorical proximity to Judaism's most sacred tomes, he is "said to have some two thousand Talmudical folios literally at his finger's [*sic*] ends." A "marvel of acumen and memory," the poor orphan's ability, at the tender age of nineteen, to best in conversation the most learned rabbis in the region (105) marks him as one possessed of superior intellect, poise and religious zeal, and it also makes him an exceedingly desirable commodity in the community's matrimonial market – so much so, in fact, that his loyalty sparks heated competition between Stroon and Reb Lippe, a successful local "'householder'" (105) promising the youth "a five-thousand rouble [*sic*] dowry" along with his daughter's hand. By incorporating a Talmudic scholar of such skill and renown into his family, Asriel hopes to reconnect with his lost 'Jewish' self, to increase his religious capital with the Almighty, to elicit the respect and admiration of his peers, and to leave a legacy that secures Flora's spiritual wellbeing as the wife of a dedicated rabbi. But Shaya's religious intellectual capital does not carry over into the new world and he is seduced, on the one hand, by American secular education and pressured, by Flora, on the other, to pursue such studies rather than furthering the Talmudic education which earned him passage across the Atlantic. The resulting situation is typical of Cahan's English-language fiction in that while the main characters all ostensibly get what they want—Stroon secures Golub as a son-in-law, Flora is married to an educated, secularized husband, and Shaya passionately involves

himself in intellectual pursuits—the American setting means that they remain fundamentally unfulfilled despite achieving their goals. Yekl, in the story that bears his name, is subject to a similar end as he divorces his ‘greenhorn’ wife and makes his way toward City Hall to marry his Americanized paramour only to feel burdened, rather than liberated, by the situation, and David Levinsky, in the author’s most enduring text, feels an acute emotional emptiness as he realizes, in his old age, that the wealth and power he has spent the majority of his life amassing leave him feeling hollow and lonely compared to the spiritual fulfillment and sense of community he enjoyed during his youth in the old country. Like a colorful local saying, expressed in the speaker’s native tongue, which somehow loses its meaning when translated into another idiom, it is as if some quintessential aspect of these characters’ desires, due to their precarious liminal position, does not completely translate from one world to another: the very act of migrating from the old world to the new—or, indeed, of simply attempting to move between cultures in the United States (Flora, the child of an immigrant, for example, never actually sets foot on European soil)—precludes their complete contentment as the two spheres they inhabit continually clash with one another and the attainment of true happiness is lost in translation. What makes a character happy in Europe, it is implied, will not make them happy in the United States, and what they think will bestow happiness in America is equally unfulfilling as it frequently leaves them feeling devoid of identity, or somehow less ‘Jewish,’ than the old world alternative.

Paradoxically, in these situations Cahan presents compromise as similarly unfulfilling; inevitably, it seems, attempting to reconcile one’s disparate socio-cultural, national-political and religious-educational affiliations by compromising between them alienates friends and family members who think the situation is either too

American, or not American enough. In the author's guise as a Yiddish language journalist he frequently gave assimilation advice to immigrants via editorials and advice columns (Lipsky *xvi*), and, later in his career, he "felt the tug of Sinai" associated with the Zionist movement (*xvi*) and his newspaper, the *Forward*, became "an impassioned supporter of Israel" (*xv*), but the beauty of his work in English is that he avoids positing the superiority of either old world or new world culture – or, indeed, of any combination of the two. This is most likely due to the fact that he was "a pragmatist, who found something lacking in all ideologies he confronted and preferred to attach himself to movements depending on the demands of a particular historical moment," which, for the purposes of modern criticism, results in "an authorial subject whose orientation toward two different public cultures is defined by revision and re-articulation of discursive positions" (Joseph 28). However, far from being a weakness, this is one of the writer's preeminent strengths; in doing so "he distinguishes himself not as a partisan but as a skeptical thinker, an ideological migrant never finally satisfied with the rightness of any available conception of Jewish subjects in community" (28-29), and this allows his narratives to focus on the trials of individual characters rather than on the larger, more abstract and theoretical issues attending the so-called 'Jewish Question' in his adopted land. Indeed, rather than advocating eastern European, American, or hybrid customs, or focusing on proposing the amendment of certain social mores in light of cross-cultural interaction in heterogeneous new world settings, Cahan, in his English language tales, "focus[es] on 'human nature' as he perceived it operating among individuals" (Marovitz "Lonely New Americans" 197) and explores the human cost of the cultural misunderstandings and inflexibilities which lead, ultimately, to personal alienation. He uses social ostracism, imposed by a suspicious, aloof, and sometimes arrogant host country, intra-

ethnic tensions amongst the immigrants themselves, and characters with conflicting goals—and allegiances—to provoke pathos, via ennui, and encourage readers to question their preconceptions regarding intercultural exchange. In the end, it is usually neither the host country's social restrictions, nor old-fashioned Jewish customs which frustrate his protagonists' efforts to achieve emotional or spiritual fulfillment (Marovitz, for example, notes that "in Cahan's fiction it is ironically not the pious Jew who suffers the pangs of longing and loneliness, but the secularized individual, who sloughed off his Judaism as though it were an old coat and thus left himself bare to face [*sic*]" the "desolation and spiritual hunger [which] are central in nearly all of the [author's] short stories"; "Lonely New Americans" 198, 200); rather, it is "an essential weakness, or flaw in the characters themselves" (197)—pride, arrogance, vanity and stubbornness are several of the author's favorites—and their preconceived notions of what is or is not socially acceptable which bring about their emotional, if not physical, downfall. Such action makes them tragic, in a classical sense, but also very human.

With this aspect of Cahan's work in mind, it is easy for the reader to see where "The Imported Bridegroom" is headed from the story's first few pages. In the opening scene, Flora is "absorbed in *Little Dorrit*" (93)—for Cahan, as we will see, makes a habit of marking his characters' aspirations to urbanity with a passionate interest in Dickens—but she allows her mind to wander toward thoughts of marriage and we learn that "a matchmaker ha[s] recently called . . . and launched into [the] eulogy of a young Jewish physician," to which Asriel has responded by declaring that "his only child . . . [will] marry a God-fearing business man, and no fellow deep in Gentile lore and shaving his beard need apply" (94). Flora, of course, being American-born, is "burning to be a doctor's wife" and fantasizes about "an educated

American gentleman, like those who [live] uptown” (94); she envisions “a clean-shaven, high-hatted, [be]spectacled” individual of whom her father would most definitely disapprove, and their quarrel is obviously going to be exacerbated by the fact that “Asriel Stroon ha[s] never been . . . [one] to yield” to the will or arguments of others (94). In this scene, “their mutual distance from one another is expressed by the varied languages the two use in conversation” (Foote 37)—Flora rushes to the door to greet her father in English, to which he responds in Yiddish before reciting a Hebrew prayer after dinner—and their misunderstandings, some of which are nonverbal (Judith Oster maintains that “in situations involving emotions” in bilingual and multilingual texts, “revert[ing] to [a] native language” establishes “greater intimacy,” so the Stroons’ refusal to vocalize in a common tongue is representative of emotional disengagement; 95), set the tone for the entire narrative. The pair’s social distance is illustrated by the disparity of their idioms, and by each character’s refusal to use the language spoken by their interlocutor (for although Stroon’s dialogue is conveyed to the reader in English, Cahan notes, in the sequence’s narration, that he is using Yiddish and, throughout the course of the novella, makes the character’s use of English conspicuous by rendering his ‘foreign’ inflections phonetically and emphasizing his awkward ‘immigrant’ vernacular), resulting in a conversation in which both father and daughter understand what the other is saying but respond in a linguistic mode specific to their character, and their cultural distance is shown by their spiritual misunderstandings: the Hebrew words Asriel intones during his prayer are “a conglomeration of incomprehensible sounds to him”—which represents his misconceptions and confused ignorance regarding Jewish spiritual identity—but he utters them fervently and understands their “exalted” significance, as does his pious, “bewigged” housekeeper, Tamara, while Flora, who finds the “rigor” of her father’s

exhibition “unbearable,” does not (Cahan “Bridegroom” 96). The young woman is eventually moved by the solemnity of the scene, but not because she finds it emotionally stirring or spiritually significant; indeed, she finds the fervent display, and her father’s newfound piety in general, wholly “unintelligible,” albeit “novel,” as she “look[s] on with the sympathetic reverence of a Christian visiting a synagogue on the Day of Atonement” (96). Cahan’s description of the younger Stroon, which likens her to a Christian, is incredibly important – it elucidates just how little she understands her progenitors’ religious practices and, as it aligns her with America’s hegemonic Gentile culture, how distant she has become from the traditional way of life such practices represent. Nor is the chasm across which father and daughter view each other shrinking: when the old man vows to visit his homeland he does not deign to take his offspring with him because “she might make fun of [Jews’] ways there” and “the pious people [would] point their fingers and call her Gentile girl” (97), which indicates that the ever-widening gap between the worlds the two individuals inhabit is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to bridge.

In the story’s relatively short first chapter, which comprises only several pages, Cahan presents a convincing portrait of a family in spiritual, and cultural, turmoil and foreshadows the story’s barbed resolution. However, when Stroon visits Poland, beginning in the third chapter, the reader is given additional clues about what is to come. The first time we encounter Shaya Golub, the Talmudic prodigy, for example, we learn that he “indulges in playfulness unbefitting a pious Jew” (Joseph 9): he is prone to “an excess of smiling frankness” (Cahan “Bridegroom” 105) and he has given snuff to a pig and raced “much younger boys” around the town of Pravly during his visit from a neighboring hamlet (106), all of which implies a degree of immaturity, which the text calls a “lack of staidness” (105), and points to a youthful penchant for

distraction that renders him a rather specious apotheosis of somber religious devotion. Furthermore, he is said to resemble, physically, a “Semitic . . . Lord Byron” (106), which calls to mind the latter’s scandalous affairs—which Cahan recreates with secular knowledge as Shaya’s mistress—and generally controversial reputation, and Asriel himself, who originally desires a “God-fearing business man” for a son-in-law (94) but changes his mind after becoming jealous of Reb Lippe’s connection with Golub, has doubts about the endeavor’s outcome. “‘What will Flora say?’ something whisper[s] . . . from a corner of [Asriel’s] overflowing heart” after he secures the pair’s engagement; “‘do you mean to tell me that the American young lady will marry this old-fashioned, pious fellow?’” (115). Stroon reassures himself by reasoning that his daughter “‘will have to marry him, and that settles it,’” but he fails to take into account the full effect of Flora’s thoroughly Americanized personality, which renders her, in the world of the novella, much less likely to bow to his paternal wishes than her eastern European counterparts, and it sounds as if he is trying to convince his own uneasy mind of the ‘selfless’ nature of his motives when he tells himself that “‘it’s for her good as well as for mine’” (115).

Cahan also hints at the text’s outcome in his depiction of the way the immigrant courts the *illoui*, as well as in the latter’s response to his overtures, as in order to establish himself as an eminently affluent and influential figure and secure the youth’s betrothal to his daughter Stroon disregards the Jewish prohibition against transacting business on the Sabbath (107) and engages in not one, but two bidding wars against his main competitor, Reb Lippe. Significantly, the first of these clashes, which sees Stroon coruscating his wealth in a synagogue and raises a red flag in that the teenager is excited, rather than repulsed, by the businessman’s actions, results in a spectacle which portrays Stroon’s religious piety as subordinate to his self-

consciously asserted identity as a wealthy and powerful American – and if the reader retains any doubt that it is indeed a financial transaction being sacrilegiously negotiated in a holy space, and on a holy day, despite using a form of currency invented by the sexton in order to avoid violating the letter of Jewish law and naming the synagogue itself as the beneficiary, this is allayed by the narration's repeated references to the proceedings as such. Stroon and Lippe are both guests of honor at the synagogue and, because of this, they are seated on either side of the "Holy Ark" at the front of the sacred space (106), but each man's pride gets the better of him and they soon succumb to petty playground one-upmanship in an effort to show off their wealth. "With the vanity . . . of peacocks[s]" (108), they engage in a battle of wills and compete for the attention of the group as only two boorish rich men can: they offer increasingly extravagant sums of money in order to secure the opportunity to read part of the Pentateuch aloud for the congregation. After making vengeful, ostentatious, and thoroughly selfishly motivated bids, there is some confusion over who has won the auction and Asriel, taking offence at what he perceives as a slight to his honor, becomes apoplectic with rage; subsequently, he plays the part of the stereotypical Ugly American as he interrupts the service to voice his indignation by proclaiming that he "'can buy up all Pravly, Reb Lippe, his [prayer shawl's] gold lace and all, and sell him at a loss, too!'" (109). Predictably, this outburst is met with incredulous hostility: several of the faithful call for Asriel's expulsion from the synagogue, and even from the town of Pravly itself (ironically, one of the angry men asks "'is this a marketplace?'" despite having no objections to the preceding auction; 109), but after the intervention of one of the rabbinical leaders soothes the situation Stroon is given leave to remain.

This synagogue scene, while establishing the superordinate nature, with regard to religious piety, of Asriel Stroon's blustery American persona, also occasions the character's disillusionment with his hometown and sees it stripped, in the protagonist's eyes, of its nostalgic nature. "When Asriel issue[s] forth from the synagogue," Cahan writes,

he [finds] Pravly completely changed. It [is] as if, while he was praying and battling, the little town ha[s] undergone a trivializing process. All the poetry of thirty-five years' separation ha[s] fled from it, leaving a heap of beggarly squalor. He [feels] as though he ha[s] never been away from the place, and [is] tired to death of it, and at the same time his heart [is] constricted with homesickness for America. (111)

Sadly, and further adducing the character's overweening fiscal ostentation, "the only interest the town [has] for him" after the episode in the synagogue is "that of a medium to be filled with the rays of his financial triumph" as he vows to "show [the townsfolk] who they are and who Asriel is" (111). This attitude—and an afternoon sermon on the importance of marrying one's daughter to a scholar which gives the immigrant "a rankling grudge against Reb Lippe" (112), who has brought the youth to town as part of a campaign to woo him into the family—convinces Stroon to take his revenge by outbidding Lippe in the contest to win Shaya's filial allegiance, and that evening he completes the second of his Sabbath transactions by offering the young man a laughably outrageous dowry of "thirty thousand rubles, and life-long board, and lodging, and bath money, and sock darning, and cigarettes, and matches, and mustard, and soap" (114). He later calls the scholar Flora's "'fifteen-thousand-dollar'" bridegroom, although, given his penchant for hyperbole, it is unclear whether or not this is simply a figure of speech (122), and Lippe's highest offer, which consists of "'ten thousand rubles and five years' board'" (113), is in fact, the narration states, more than the man can actually afford to provide. Despite Stroon's religious

convictions, his motivation for securing Shaya as a son-in-law seems to be as much a matter of wounded pride as of piety, which is reiterated when he introduces the teenager to his daughter by bragging that he “beat [Reb Lippe] clean out of his boots” to procure the engagement (122), and the structure of the text reinforces this aspect of the narrative by using the next scene to sound the metaphorical death knell of old world religion. In it, the narrator describes Asriel’s visit to the local cemetery to visit the graves of his parents, and “while living Pravly ha[s] increased by scarcely a dozen houses” in the time since Stroon left Poland, “the number of dwellings in silent Pravly ha[s] nearly doubled” (115); the old world village, and, by association, its traditional Judaism, which Stroon had hoped to recapture by visiting the town of his birth and enlisting the aid of a local Talmudic wunderkind, is quite literally dying – which, when combined with the character’s disenchantment following the previous day’s synagogue-based debacle, has ramifications for his entire household. Indeed, the patriarch’s less-than-honorable intentions—and methods—in securing Golub’s troth, even if they are subconscious, instinctual reactions to the situation at hand, are rewarded in kind as the focus of the story shifts to the young man’s educational dealings in the new world: for once he arrives in New York City, Shaya Golub begins a journey that sees him seduced away from the religious aspect of his Jewish identity and engaged in a “transformation from prodigy to heretic” (Foote 45). Ultimately, when he discovers that his protégé is becoming an *appikoros*, which the author footnotes as an “Epicurean” or “atheist” (Cahan “Bridegroom” 147), Stroon’s lament that “it’s all gone!” (154), made to Tamara, his pious housekeeper, echoes his cry in the graveyard at Pravly whence he wailed “all is gone, Asrielke! All, all, all is lost forever!” (117).

Cahan, of course, frequently excoriated what he called the “cheap sentimentality” of American amusements (Poole 478) and “censured the gross sentimentalism that pervaded the novels and periodicals of [his] day” (Marovitz “Lonely New Americans” 198), and while the story as a whole “wickedly satirizes” the “dis-abling [*sic*] nostalgia” (Weber 733) of contemporary texts in which ethnic characters are “immobilized by a yearning for the villages left behind,” “The Imported Bridegroom” is presented in two distinct sections. The first emphasizes Stroon’s journey to revisit the rural Poland of his past—an attempt to run to the nostalgic spiritual comfort of the old country which stands in stark contrast to what Weber calls Levinsky’s “flight from memory” (732) as the latter is “driven to succeed on New-World terms yet haunted by the vague insubstantiality of success” which accords no spiritual fulfillment (733)—and the second focuses on Shaya’s evolution from “innocent Talmudic scholar” to “radical social thinker/theorist” (733). The interlude during which Asriel Stroon travels to Pravly is parodic of the pastoral and ‘local color’ genres stereotypically associated with the concurrent American immigrant literary community, which is part of Cahan’s satirical comedy, but dividing the text between the old world and the new serves another purpose as it reinforces the mutual exclusivity of the piety endemic to each region and localizes Shaya’s educational experience such that the character’s transformation becomes synonymous with the setting in which it occurs. The latter portion of the narrative uses the youth’s voracious intellectual appetite as the catalyst which instigates and perpetuates this fundamental change, and his transformation, while encouraged by Flora, outstrips her expectations and ultimately leaves her feeling abandoned on their wedding day as the scholar ignores her in favor of his learned secular colleagues (Cahan “Bridegroom” 159-162). During the early stages of Golub’s intellectual metamorphosis, Cahan’s

description of the process mirrors the scholar's hunger for "Gentile books" (134) by relying on language typically associated with ingestion – and, significantly, by making use of words connoting connoisseurship, which indicates, for the reader, that the young man's prodigious talent for erudition, if not the focus of his studies, has carried over into the story's American setting. After relating that Shaya's "greatest pleasure" is solving "arithmetical problems," for instance, the narrator reveals that "the novelty of studying things so utterly out of his rut [is] like a newly discovered delicacy to his mental palate" and, subsequently, comments about the manner in which he "crave[s] some higher grade of intellectual food" become apposite to the character's quest for intellectual stimulation (135). "Forbidden fruit" (136), in the form of a geometry textbook, is provided by his tutor, who is then dismissed by Stroon for "getting too thick with the boy," and thereafter the prodigy's "soul . . . languish[es] with thirst" due to a lack of academic discourse (and, of course, it is no coincidence that Asriel's ultimate horror commences, later in the story, when he witnesses Shaya and his former instructor entering a "Christian restaurant" after emerging from the Astor Library; 152). Soon, however, the metaphor likening the youth's scholarly pursuits to comestible sustenance, which need be partaken of only sporadically in order to keep the body alive, gives way to one which illuminates his compulsion as something far more pressing and immediate: the need for air itself. With the departure of his tutor and the introduction of Flora as his primary academic mentor—one might also say 'coconspirator,' given their ongoing task of hiding the boy's secular studies from his religiously-minded benefactor—Shaya is "in a fever of impatience to inhale the whole of the Gentile language—definitions, spelling, pronunciation, and all—with one desperate effort. It [is] the one great impediment

that seem[s] to stand between him and the enchanted new world [of profane knowledge] that ha[s] revealed itself to him” in the United States (138).

It is at this point in the narrative that Shaya Golub becomes, according to Philip Joseph, “a supremely mimetic and historically revealing character” (9) due to the fact that he has been portrayed as fundamentally “rudderless,” which allows “the most powerful agency(s) in relation to the Jews—whether it be the distinctive religious and political experience of the European diaspora, the impact of a cosmopolitan American context, or a combination of both—to speak transparently through his actions” (9). Indeed, for the majority of the novella the teenager’s religious circumstances seem to be dictated solely by his geographical context while his personal habits and intellectual proclivities are determined by a series of strong external forces embodied by insistent, if not pushy or outright domineering individuals: the youth is purported to be the very model of erudite Talmudic Judaism when the audience encounters him, in Poland, under the influence of his uncles, who are negotiating his betrothal, and Reb Lippe, who wants the boy to marry into his family based on his academic reputation; Asriel Stroon swoops in and quickly becomes the dominant figure in Pravly, and as such he thenceforth determines the young academician’s path by inducing his emigration; in New York City, Shaya’s engagement with his tutor piques an interest in secular learning and, upon their estrangement, Flora steps in to fill the void by attempting to mold him into the doctor she dreams of marrying at the beginning of the tale. Joseph’s claim, based on the protagonist’s archetypal function and representative mimesis, that “as Shaya goes, so go the American Jews” (9), is, however, a bit of an exaggeration; for although he is subject to the power and influence of characters representing disparate geographies, nationalities, and ideological movements, Golub is constantly subverting the

expectations—and thwarting the desires—of his overseers, as evidenced by his youthful antics in Pravly, by his desertion of Lippe and his deception of Stroon, and, at the text’s conclusion, by his indifference toward Flora, which belies his importance, as Joseph would have it, as a sort of barometer of American Judaism. In point of fact, in the text’s final scene the young man takes part in a cosmopolitan, transnational colloquy comprising

a middle-aged man with a handsome and intensely intellectual Scotch [*sic*] face, who [*is*] a laborer by day and a philosopher by night; a Swedish tailor with the face of a Catholic priest; a Zurich Ph.D. in blue eyeglasses; a young Hindoo [*sic*] who eke[s] out a wretched existence by selling first-rate articles to second-rate weeklies, and several Russian Jews, all of them insatiable debaters and most of them with university or gymnasium diplomas. (Cahan “Bridegroom” 160)

This motley crew of intellectuals-errant, it is said, meets “every Thursday to read and discuss Harriet Martineau’s *Auguste Comte*,³⁰ under the guidance of the Scotchman [*sic*], who [*is*] a leading spirit in positivist circles” (160), and there is little doubt that this mode of academic interaction is not what Flora Stroon had in mind when she began pushing Shaya in the direction of collegiate endeavors. It is true that such an encounter can be seen as representative of the “cosmopolitan American context” which influences Golub as “the most powerful agency” amongst those vying for his attention (Joseph 9), but there is a pronounced element of self-determination in this conclusion as well. Previously, Shaya Golub has been steered toward shifting fates by one powerful individual at a time—his uncles,³¹ Reb Lippe, Stroon, the unnamed

³⁰ Martineau, in addition to her own sociological writings, was a well-known translator of Comte’s work. The latter is significant, in this context, for his atheistic positivism and his influence on the Secular Humanist movement.

³¹ Although the narration refers to Shaya’s uncles in the plural, they never appear independently of one another and have such a minimal presence in the text that they remain fundamentally indistinguishable as separate entities. As such, they can be seen as a singular figure representing familial influence in the life of their orphaned nephew without incurring the sort of filial obligation which might dissuade him from emigration or hinder his educational transformation in the new world by necessitating entry into the workforce in order to send money back to Poland.

tutor, and Flora, respectively—but it is the young man himself who decides to give his attention to a philosophical debate rather than spending time with his bride after their (secular) courthouse nuptials. One might argue that the gathering embodies, by its nature as a group, the sheer power of the lure of American cosmopolitanism as compared to the influence of certain aspects of Judaism and Jewish immigrant culture personified by the singular entities who represent them in Shaya’s life, but there is enough autonomous agency in the young scholar’s decision to attend the meeting—which takes place in his former tutor’s room at a lodging house—to vitiate a reading of the text which assesses him as completely “rudderless” (Joseph 9). This agency does not, of course, prevent the youth from acting as an archetype; it merely reduces the mimetic aspect of his character in accordance with Cahan’s goal of presenting him as one who pursues new world education with the zeal of an old world Talmudist rather than reifying him as the quintessence of the urban American Jew in general. For if America sweeps Shaya Golub toward secularism, he is the one who ultimately chooses what, and whom, he will embrace as part of his transformation even if he lacks the courage to voice his own opinions during the conversation held in his ex-tutor’s tenement (Cahan “Bridegroom” 161).

**“A House of Sanctity”:
The Idolatry of “Real Yankee” Instruction³²**

As one whose natural curiosity and acumen lead to intellectual experimentation and, ultimately, apostasy, Shaya’s journey—and its resultant atheism—prefigures David Levinsky, who, as befitting a fully realized protagonist in

³² Cahan *Levinsky* 165, 245

a more mature and lengthy work of fiction, has a correspondingly nuanced conversion from the sacred to the profane. Shaya, the recently-arrived immigrant excited by the possibilities of his new home, is in his enthusiasm for mental stimulation oblivious to “the charming dream of the past” (Marovitz “Lonely New Americans” 200) which haunts so many other immigrants in contemporary ‘ghetto’ fiction,³³ and as a result he can enthusiastically attack new world pursuits without “suffering for very long in a state of nostalgia.” This fact accords with most of Cahan’s other English language texts, as well as with a spate of immigrant memoir and autobiographical writing both past and present, in that those indulging in nostalgic reminiscences of their former lives frequently do so years after the fact when the novelty of their adopted land has worn off—or, at the very least, is significantly diminished by an ongoing familiarity with its mores—and the ‘golden land’ has become tarnished by a degree of disillusion. Golub’s freedom from such musings, and his youthful infatuation with the supposedly limitless resources of knowledge at his disposal in New York City, lead him to pursue his forbidden studies with gusto: essentially, “the witchcraft of . . . Gentile books” can only seduce him into performing the “monkey tricks they teach . . . children at college,” as Asriel Stroon puts it, because he is unbound by emotional hindsight (Cahan “Bridegroom” 152; 134). Levinsky’s educational endeavors are similarly seductive, and this aspect of both narratives is reinforced by the presence, in the houses in which the main characters live for a time, of coy and desirable women—the daughters of the protagonists’ benefactors—who taunt them for their old-fashioned

³³ Such nostalgia is not confined to fiction and is a prominent feature of immigrant and ethnic autobiographies published in America throughout the twentieth century. Petra Fachinger, for instance, notes that “what [Eva] Hoffman and [Richard] Rodriguez”—the Jewish, Polish immigrant author of *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989) and the Mexican-American author of *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982), respectively—“have in common is their nostalgia for a pastoral past” which “prevents them from linking collective ethnic memory and individual memory in a dialogue, a narrative strategy that, according to Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, is characteristic of ‘ethnic autobiography’” (124).

appearances and manners and encourage their secular academic progress. Shaya receives his first kiss from Flora while reading to her in English, whereupon it is suggested that he “‘study doctor books’” (139), and he capitulates in order to receive additional affection; and *Levinsky’s* Matilda, with whom the titular character has fallen in love, makes him promise “‘to become an educated man in America’” (80) because she thinks “‘it’s a crime for a young man like [David] to throw himself away on that idiotic Talmud’” (72). But there is enough difference in the two Talmudists’ experiences to prevent Shaya Golub from seeming a preliminary sketch for the character of David Levinsky, or, conversely, to render inaccurate an assessment of the later novel which views Levinsky’s journey as a literary rehash of the earlier character’s development.

Upon cursory examination there are, of course, a number of pronounced similarities between Cahan’s two scenarios. Like Stroon, for instance, Levinsky’s elderly patron, Shiphrah Minsker, is a recently-pious Jew who uses her considerable wealth to acquire religious currency by supporting Talmudic scholars. The text states that her “latest hobby [is] to care for at least eighteen pious Talmudists,” but the narration tempers her zeal by relating that she wears her hair wigless in the “‘Gentile fashion,’” “a great sin,” implying that her actions are both a passing phase and a calculated display of piety (*Levinsky* 58). Minsker’s family comprises “‘modern,’” secularized individuals who speak the local language (in this case Russian), “‘[behave] like Gentiles’” (66), and find traditional expressions of religion, and, by extension, their matriarch’s quasi-orthodox behavior, “old-fashioned” and “ridiculous” (65); her intervention is responsible for Levinsky’s emigration—though not as directly as Stroon’s actions in poaching Shaya Golub from Lippe—and, in the form of her daughter, Matilda, sows the seeds of his atheistic education. However, the differences

between them are equally striking. The mercurial Matilda, for example, a divorcée, ultimately remains aloof and halts David's courtship when it begins to become serious, establishing a pattern which sees the future millionaire pursuing relationships with unattainable women for the duration of the text. Levinsky's religious declension, though it seems, at first, strikingly similar to Golub's, is also divergent from that of his textual predecessor as his incipient apostasy, occasioned by the death of his mother and fostered by the atheism of Naphtali, one of his closest childhood friends, commences in Russia rather than America, whereupon his transition from a sacred to a secular conception of intellect represents but an episode in the larger narrative rather than constituting the whole of the narrative itself. These differences, which explore subtly divergent aspects of their common theme, allow the author to expound upon a pervasive immigrant writing trope by expanding the sentiments present in his earlier work and presenting them in the context of a whole life's story rather than as a vignette glimpsed briefly by the audience before the writer goes on to delve into the lives of other characters. Descriptions of encounters with American education—whether it be education as an all-consuming and putatively liberating ideal (as in Cahan's work and a number of Anzia Yezierska's texts), an abstruse, recondite concept representing the enigmatic character of American suburbanism (as in Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and "Soap and Water"), a concrete experience reifying an individual's unshakeable 'otherness' (such as in Rose Cohen's *Out of the Shadow* and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*), or a plausible gateway to successful Americanization (as is the case with Mary Antin's *Promised Land* and Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*)—appear in immigrant and ethnic texts with such regularity as to seem ubiquitous, but Cahan uses such encounters to probe the relationships between ethnicity, intellectual identity, and religious ardor with a depth that eludes many, if

not all of his contemporaries. Indeed, with *Levinsky* the author posits questions about the very nature of intellect itself and wonders if greed, insatiability, and atheism are necessary byproducts of the American educational system.

To achieve this effect, Cahan's depiction of David Levinsky's slow slide into atheism is an intricately plotted one which progresses by degrees. Even after the death of his mother, which proves the impetus of his apostasy, and his compounding disillusion at the hands of Naphtali and Matilda, whose rebuff echoes in his mind all the way across the Atlantic and "blend[s] with the hostile glamour of America" (87), the young man insists on maintaining a regimen of personal piety during his voyage to the United States by performing devotions three times a day, "without counting a benediction before every meal and every drink of water, grace after every meal and a prayer before going to sleep" (85). His "scanty luggage" is likewise religious; it consists of "a pair of phylacteries³⁴ and a plump little prayer-book, with the book of Psalms at the end" (85), and *en route* the young man develops the habit of reading these Psalms aloud ("the prayers," he confides, he "[knows] by heart"; 85-86) "when the sea look[s] angry and the pitching and rolling [of the ship] [is] unusually violent" (86). His religious mien impresses one of his shipmates, a Jewish tailor named Gitelson who appreciates these recitations despite a minimal comprehension of their meaning, and engenders a brief friendship between the two, but as soon as they set foot on American soil David's religious orthodoxy becomes more than a hindrance to social inclusion – it becomes, in fact, an impediment to his very survival. Having no relatives to meet them at port, Gitelson and Levinsky, who acts as a *de facto* leader to counteract the tailor's "timid" bearing (89), wander into New York on their own and

³⁴ Small leather cases designed to hold scriptures inscribed on pieces of parchment, phylacteries, in the Orthodox tradition, are to be worn by all Jewish males aged thirteen and over. They are meant to function as a bodily reminder of God and the Written Law and thus promote an intimate relationship with both in the course of daily life.

are met by a “cloak contractor” (90) who frequents the neighborhood of Castle Garden, one of the city’s main immigration checkpoints, “to angle for cheap labor among the newly arrived immigrants.” The man successfully deduces Gitelson’s trade but tells Levinsky that ““read[ing] Talmud”” is ““no business in America”” (91); he whisks the tailor off to work after giving David a quarter and telling him to “keep walking until [he] see[s] a lot of Jewish people”—presumably in the vicinity of the Lower East Side—and the young Talmudist is left standing in a foreign street unemployed, bereft of his sole companion, and “with a sickening sense of having been tricked, cast off, and abandoned.” “On shipboard,” Levinsky has previously noted, he “was sure of [his] shelter and food, at least,” but as the vessel approaches New York Bay he begins to wonder how he will “procure [his] sustenance on [America’s] magic shores” (87). He is also, after seeing the “cries of joy, tears, embraces, [and] kisses” bestowed upon passengers with friends and family waiting to receive them at the gangplank, so to speak, prey to an intense “sense of loneliness and dread of the New World” (89); hence the profound sense of abandonment, encountered almost immediately after disembarking onto American soil, which afflicts the protagonist as his only acquaintance—a sickly, tattered, and supremely diffident specimen—is taken away by the latter’s newfound employer is one which shakes Levinsky to his core. Indeed, the first person narration states that he “may safely say that the half-hour that followed” his shipmate’s departure “is one of the worst [he has] experienced in all the thirty-odd years of his life in [the United States]” (91). This incident teaches David a valuable lesson about the sort of Jew who achieves economic ascendance in the United States—for Gitelson is markedly less religious than Levinsky himself, as evidenced by the former’s ignorance regarding the Talmudist’s prayer-book and his rapt attention when the scholar explains the words he

intones upon sighting land from the ship's railing (88)—and, along with the “gruff,” “unfriendly voices” of the immigration officials who have met the immigrants at the dock (89), “flavor[s] all America with a spirit of icy inhospitality that [sends] a shiver through [Levinsky's] very soul.”

After this initial cold reception, David makes his way to the ghetto and encounters a series of individuals who provide material assistance and emotional support, and he persists, for a time, in his religious ways, to the degree which his new life as a local peddler will allow. By his own admission, he develops “neither vim nor ardor for the occupation” of pushcart vendor (105) and is dulled by the “daily grind” of work to which he is unaccustomed (103). He “hanker[s] after intellectual interest and [becomes] increasingly homesick” (105), and “whatever enthusiasm there [is] in [him] [finds] vent in religion” (107), which serves the dual purpose of allaying his homesickness and reconnecting him with the “former,” eastern European self who “address[es] [him] across the sea in [the] strange, uninviting, big town where [he is] compelled to peddle shoe-black or oil-cloth and to compete with . . . yelling idiot[s]” (107) – for, although he has only been in America a short time, David Levinsky is already experiencing the separation of self which accompanies emigration and resettlement. In the evenings, he reads Talmud “passionately” in a synagogue comprising other Russian Jews from his hometown of Antomir, and at times he feels “tears coming to [his] eyes for the sheer joy of hearing [his] own . . . Antomir singsong” “like an echo from the Preacher's Synagogue” where he spent a preponderance of his youth engaging in Talmudic pursuits (107). However, “many of the other peddlers [make] fun of [his] piety and it [can] not last long” (108) as the “daily surprises” of life in the United States deal his “former ideas of the world blow after blow.” The young man observes the “cunning and . . . meanness of some of [his]

customers, of the tradespeople of whom [he buys his] wares, and of the peddlers who [do] business by [his] side” (108), and, moreover, becomes conscious of “certain unlovable traits that [are] unavoidably developing in [his] own self under these influences.” Levinsky soon realizes that “it [is] not a world of piety,” and his older, narratorial self uses this opportunity to ruminate on the nature of religious conviction. “The orthodox Jewish faith,” he exposit, “has still to learn the art of trimming its sails to suit new winds.”

It does not attempt to adopt [*sic*] itself to modern conditions as the Christian Church is continually doing. It is absolutely inflexible. If you are a Jew of the type to which I belonged when I came to New York and you attempt to bend your religion to the spirit of your new surroundings, it breaks. It falls to pieces. The very clothes I wore and the very food I ate had a fatal effect on my religious habits. (108)

“A whole book,” he claims, “could be written on the influence of a starched collar and a necktie on a man brought up as I was. It was inevitable that, sooner or later, I should let a barber shave my sprouting beard” (108). As we saw in Chapter One, committing what Levinsky calls the “heinous . . . sin” of shaving (109) is in many Jewish writers’ texts symbolic of the final casting off of traditional piety, and Cahan emphasizes this point by making it the final episode in a section of the book which the narrator entitles “I Discover America.” Book V ends after the paragraph in which Levinsky receives his first shave and the subsequent page boldly proclaims the title of Book VI, “A Greenhorn No Longer,” in which David Levinsky, formerly a devout Talmudic scholar, attempts to seduce several married women and makes a habit of visiting prostitutes.

It is not surprising that Abraham Cahan should present the concept of American education as being antithetical to Jewish orthodoxy in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, but it is interesting to note the point of the novel at which he introduces it.

In the first and second chapters of Book VI, Levinsky, goaded into action by the lurid stories of one of his suppliers, ‘Maximum’ Max Margolis, with whose wife David will later enter into an illicit relationship, resolves to kiss two married women—his current landlady, Mrs. Levinsky (to whom he bears no relation), and a former landlady, Mrs. Dienstog, with whose family he maintains regular contact—but, despite receiving a “feverish kiss” from the latter (120), his lust is thwarted by their resolve. Natalie Friedman, in “Adultery and the Immigrant Narrative,” maintains that “the changes wrought by migration are represented through the trope of marriages and intimate relationships that unravel in America” in works written by Cahan, Louis Chu, Junot Díaz, Lara Vapnyar, and Gish Jen (71), and she presents a compelling argument for infidelity, in Cahan’s *Yekl*, as being representative of “a departure from . . . Jewish eastern European custom” (75). In effect, she claims that the jettisoning of old world affiliations attending the title character’s “rejection of his wife Gitl and the pursuit of Mamie,” his new world paramour, “suggest . . . the first glimmerings of a departure from seeing himself as an eastern European Jewish greenhorn” (75). It is appropriate, then, that *Levinsky*’s Book VI—“A Greenhorn No Longer”—commences with descriptions of attempted adultery. Following these events, the third chapter of Book VI alludes to the loss of David’s virginity and recounts, rather frankly, “a period of unrestrained misconduct” in which the main character, “intoxicated by the novelty of yielding to Satan, [gives] him a free hand,” which results in “months of debauchery and self-disgust” as the impecunious immigrant wantonly cavorts with professional women he can barely afford to pay (Cahan *Levinsky* 121). Finally, in the midst of all this ill-advised—but candidly narrated—sexual dalliance, Cahan presents David’s entry into the world of public education: coming on the heels of chapter three, which focuses on the protagonist’s patronization of prostitutes, Levinsky opens the fourth

chapter with the brazenly simple statement “I enrolled in a public evening school” (125). While shaving his beard, lying about the goods he sells, and indulging in lasciviously promiscuity, David Levinsky, never one to do things by halves, throws himself into his studies “with unbounded enthusiasm” (125) and thus embarks on yet another sin—that of idolatry—as he sacrifices his religion on the altar of secular education.

Levinsky tells the reader that, unlike his sink-or-swim induction into American social graces, his night classes are “a matter of book-learning, something in which [he feels] at home” given his Talmudic history (125), and he proclaims that he quickly begins to attend school “with religious devotion” (129). While the latter statement may seem to be an exaggeration or mere turn of phrase, it proves, for a time at least, to be an accurate description of his dedication, if not an understatement. Indeed, the young man claims that “the prospect of going to school in the evening would loom before [him], during the hours of boredom or distress [he] spent at [his] [push]cart, as a promise of divine pleasure” (129), and this is an interesting choice of words to describe a thoroughly secular educational tradition – especially when it stands in such stark contrast to his earlier conception of American education as being both spiritually and intellectually inferior to the Talmudic tradition. Interesting, too, is the character’s—and Cahan’s—decision to label Book VII, in which the protagonist buries himself most deeply in secular studies, “My Temple,” which title reifies the pursuit of profane knowledge as completely supplanting Levinsky’s former religiosity. Having completed his course of study in Bender’s classroom, David receives as a gift from the teacher a small English dictionary and a copy of Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* which proves, in the short term, to be his financial downfall as well as a cerebral stimulant. Dickens’ tome is “the first novel [he] ha[s] ever read” and “the

dramatic interest of the narrative, coupled with the poetry and the humor with which it is so richly spiced,” is “a revelation” to him (Cahan *Levinsky* 135); “literally intoxicated, . . . [he] delay[s] going to business from hour to hour” in order to continue “reading, or, rather, studying,” the text “with voluptuous abandon till [he finds himself] literally penniless” (135). With his career as a pushcart peddler thus at an end, David, hungry in both the literal and metaphorical senses of the word, drifts through a series of unpleasant employments before settling, at the recommendation of Gitelson, his former shipmate with whom he has a chance meeting outside of a dance hall on Grand Street, into an apprenticeship in a cloak manufactory. Gitelson, it seems, has become quite successful in the sixteen month interim since the two parted company, and his tale of “educated fellows” who read between ““bundle[s]” of work in factories inspires Levinsky (146). The main character is subsequently “haunted” by “the image of . . . cloak-operator[s] reading books and laying by money for a college education,” and he asks “Why could I not do the same?” The thought of “the kind of education which Matilda had dinned into [his] ears” (146)—that is, an areligious education—goads David into accepting the tailor’s offer of assistance and he is soon practicing the trade of a machine operator while nurturing dreams of attending an institution of higher learning.

Levinsky, like Sara Smolinsky in Anzia Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers*, the unnamed protagonist of her short story “Soap and Water,” and any number of other characters in contemporary immigrant fiction, regards his new trade “merely as a stepping-stone to a life of intellectual interests” (Cahan *Levinsky* 146), so its physical drudgery and long hours, while necessary to achieve his ends, impress him as thoroughly menial. He soon “pitie[s] himself for a degraded wretch” (148) because, as the older man, narrating retrospectively, states, “as a peddler [he] seemed to belong

to the world of business, to the same class as the rich, the refined, while now . . . [he is] a workman, a laborer, one of the masses,” and the result of this attitude is an efflorescing glamorization of the American educational institutions to which he aspires as he increasingly “abhor[s] the shop and everybody in it as a well-bred convict abhors his jail and his fellow-inmates” (148). Like Shaya Golub, the young David Levinsky is portrayed as somewhat ‘rudderless’ as he drifts between situations—and careers—at the whim or suggestion of others, but he makes the most of his new occupation and states that he “now ate and slept well,” “was in the best of health and . . . spirits,” and existed “in an uplifted state of mind” (149). Indeed, shortly thereafter “no one seem[s] [to David] to be honorable who [does] not earn his bread in the sweat of his brow” (149), but as the specter of New York’s City College continues to appear in his sweatshop environment via the sons of fellow employees (Levinsky dutifully reports that “the East Side was full of poor Jews—wage earners, peddlers, grocers, salesmen, insurance agents—who would beggar themselves to give their children a liberal education”; 152) he begins to feel as if he himself “were bound to that college with the ties of kinship” (152). “Then, too,” he writes, “thousands of our [Jewish] working-men attended public evening school, while many others took lessons at home. The Ghetto rang with a clamor for knowledge” in the early twentieth century, so “to save up some money and prepare for college seem[s] to be the most natural thing for [David] to do” (152).

The ardor with which Levinsky subsequently attacks his intellectual pursuits is part of a widespread and well-established pattern in immigrant writing which has its roots firmly set in real-world experience. Alice Kessler-Harris, who is largely responsible for bringing Yezierska’s major works of fiction back into print after decades of neglect, for example, writes that many contemporary Jews “struggle[d] out

of [New York's] Lower East Side" by "nourish[ing] themselves on hope while they slaved to educate themselves and their children" (Introduction xxxiv) and states that "to finish high school, even to attend college became a single-minded obsession for those who wanted to shed the greenhorn image" (xxxix). David's admission that the word "college . . . was forever buzzing in [his] ear," "the seven letters . . . forever floating before [his] eyes" (Cahan *Levinsky* 164), speaks to such an educative fixation while "every bit of new knowledge [he] acquire[s] arouse[s] his enthusiasm" and fans a "continuous turmoil of exultation" which emulates religious fervor. This divergence from the standard paradigm is what differentiates Cahan's tale from a slew of other narratives depicting new immigrants' encounters with American scholastic institutions. Levinsky's idolization of higher education is not unique, nor does his coincident departure from the orthodox tradition seem out of place in a work of fiction which trades on the currency of immigrant memoir, but actively working to translate the main character's obstinate, obsessive and overachieving personality from a pious devotee of the Talmud to one who literally worships at the altar of secular instruction, and reporting this transition in such frank and candid first person narration, is the work's *pièce de résistance*. Even when doing so is unflattering, David Levinsky minces no words in relating his change from religious scholar to idolatrous apostate; he dutifully records the "reverence" with which he watches students enter university buildings, reports that the "red, ivy-clad walls, mysterious high windows, [and] humble spires" of the City College edifice he makes a habit of passing appeal to him as "the synagogue of his new life" (165)—a proclamation which borders on blasphemy—and states that it is "a symbol of spiritual promotion" as well as a place to "acquire knowledge" because "university-bred people [are] the real nobility of the world" whose "college diploma[s] [are] . . . certificate[s] of moral as well as

intellectual aristocracy.” Indeed, by this point in the novel the protagonist seems to have undergone a complete spiritual inversion which sees him not only abandon the Jewish faith, but fulminate against it as something base and impure when compared to the sublime ideology at the center of his new devotion. He avers that “[his] old religion ha[s] gradually fallen to pieces, and if its place [has been] taken by something else, if there [is] something that appeal[s] to the better man in [him], to what [is] purest and most sacred in [his] emotions, that something [is] the red, church-like structure on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and Twenty-third Street” which houses the local branch of the College of the City of New York (165). As is the case with most of his life’s events, the reader is unsure how much of the millionaire’s reportage is veracious and how much is tinged with the imperfection of memory—the narratorial Levinsky, after all, uses the phrase “House of Sanctity,” which is an appellation for “the ancient Temple of Jerusalem,” to refer to the City College building at the center of his preoccupation but admits that this is “the term [he] would fondly apply to it, years later, in [his] retrospective broodings upon the first few years of [his] life in America” (165)—but the concepts of education and recollection work in tandem to emphasize how long David carries, and aggrandizes, certain memories, as evidenced by his frequent and life-long yearning for the iconographic Matilda, and how quickly he forgets others, such as the religious devotion which defined his youth. The latter, it seems, comes back to haunt him in his twilight years, hence its simultaneously nostalgic and frustrating presence in his account of life in the United States – nostalgic due to its comforting links to childhood, ethnic identity and ‘home,’ and frustrating in its irreconcilability with the old man’s present circumstances despite somehow being at the very core of who he is. But in the interim, as he turns his back on Talmudic study, fornicates with prostitutes,

pursues numerous married women, dines in ‘unclean’ Gentile restaurants, and lies, steals designs and cheats his way to the top of the country’s clothing business, he seems to have forgotten religion altogether.

As David engages in his studies “with a passion amounting to a frenzy” (171), he becomes willing to sacrifice almost anything to finance his collegiate dream. Illustrating the lengths to which he will go in order to fund his endeavor—and how little he considers others when pursuing his objectives—he even attempts to court Gussie, a girl from his shop “who save[s] for a marriage portion too energetically to make a marriage” (172), by which he means that she works too long and hard saving money for a dowry to have any time left for socializing, in order to gain access to her money. Levinsky admits that “she [does] not interest [him] in the least” (192) as he thinks she is “plain and has a washed-out appearance and [is] none too young” (172), but he is “too passionately in love with [his] prospective *alma mater*”—which he has previously referred to as his “bride-elect” (171)—“to care whether [he] could love [his] fiancée or not” (172). “The notion of marrying [Gussie] for her money,” he confides, “[seems] a joke, even if she were better-looking and younger” (189), but, nevertheless, he is determined to make the attempt. The woman, however, is under no illusions as to the reason behind Levinsky’s interest and will not allow herself to be used; she halts his bid for a “‘college match’” (172) who will “pay [his] bills” (173) while he studies at the university level, and the irony of such a pairing, which echoes the old world convention of a hardworking, toilsome wife who provides material support for her husband’s intellectually-inclined soft labor, is lost on the protagonist if not on the woman he is attempting to rein into a similar proposition. He describes Meyer Nodelman, who is “perhaps the dearest friend [he has] had in America” (173), and definitely the longest-standing as he claims that he is a “warm friend to this day”

(173), as “crassly illiterate”—hardly friendly words—and thus betrays his arrogance and condescension regarding even those supposedly closest to him whom he deems inferior due to a lack of proper educative instruction. David considers Nodelman’s commercial warehouse “the seat of his cold self-interest” (214), but later, after Levinsky has turned his hand to manufacturing, he encounters his friend in that setting and calls him a “dignified” “self-made man” (215; 214), as if “the environment of his little kingdom ha[s] made another man of him” (215), and, reiterating the traditionally Jewish respect for an educated man, Nodelman agrees to help the former Talmudist shore up his fledgling business because he “‘rather like[s] the way [David] talk[s]’” (215); “‘an educated fellow who can talk like that,’” he soliloquizes, “‘will be alright. He ought to be given a lift.’”

As Kessler-Harris says of his real-world contemporaries, David has “nourished [himself] on hope” while struggling to survive his first few years in the United States (Introduction xxxiv), and his dream of attending university classes is largely responsible for the drive and determination fostered by this hope. His collegiate fantasy is a concrete goal inspiring hard work and thriftiness and “a source of consolation” when he encounters setbacks (Cahan *Levinsky* 209)—for “what,” he asks, “[is] money beside the halo of higher education?”—but it is not to last. Although he has comported himself well in night school and begun preparing for college entrance examinations, his rudderless nature strikes again and the winds of fate steer him toward his destiny as a clothing manufacturer before his plans reach fruition; “the spell of [his] college aspirations is broken once and for all,” “[his] Temple . . . destroyed” (209), as he turns his attention to matters of industry under the guise of gaining independence from the oppressive atmosphere of the factory in which he labors to earn money for tuition. Typically, it is “an unimportant accident, a mere

trifle,” which “suddenly [gives] a new turn to . . . the character of [his] life” (181) (he later claims that the event in question “led [him] astray” from his true calling and says “it was the devil that put it in [his] head to become a manufacturer”; 255). But, ever the opportunist, Levinsky seizes the opportunity to go into business for himself and thus, despite an initial period of trying to reconcile trade and education, abandons all hope of attending an institution of higher learning. After a fleeting altercation with his sweatshop supervisor results in an offhand insult, David resolves to exact vengeance on the man by luring away Ansel Chaiken, the talented but “quiet . . . and unassuming” clothing designer responsible for the factory’s success (183), and he sinks the savings meant for his tuition fees, and all of his time and energy, into entrepreneurship in order to restore his dignity by “becoming a fatal competitor” of his American-born tormentor (183). The thought of “leaving the Manheimers,” who own the shop, “in a lurch,” however, is only part of the venture’s allure; David “[en]vision[s] [him]self a rich man” (183)—“there is plenty of money in cloaks,” he tells Chaiken’s wife, “and [he] is bent upon making heaps, great heaps of it” (194)—and “the . . . scheme [is] scarcely ever absent from [his] mind” as he “trie[s] to reconcile this new dream . . . with [his] college projects” (184). He “picture[s] [him]self building up a great cloak business and somehow contriving, at the same time, to go to college” (184), but it is not to be: he chooses the life of a factory owner over a life of scholarship and pursues it with characteristic vigor, building a veritable empire around business practices which can only be described as *louche* and unscrupulous and rising to dizzying heights of wealth and power in the process.

The extent of Levinsky’s transition from aspiring scholar to canny entrepreneur is described, later in the text, by the reappearance of Bender, his former instructor, whom the protagonist suddenly views as “piteously beneath him” despite

previously “look[ing] up to him as infinitely . . . superior” (305), and who is thenceforth subjugated as one of the cloakmaker’s employees. Yet despite the industrialist’s subsequent prosperity the influence of his university aspirations never quite leaves him. He admits, as an aging narrator, that he is still subject to “vague yearnings” for “[his] Temple,” and that “something like a feeling of compunction . . . assert[s] itself . . . to this day” (209), and he maintains that even though the branch of City College he so admired “has long since moved to a much larger and more imposing building,” the “dignified and . . . fascinating” structure on Twenty-third and Lexington is still “a sacred spot” for him (209); “it is a sepulcher,” he asserts, “of [his] dearest ambitions, a monument to [his] noblest enthusiasm in America” (209). Indeed, although he struggles through the ranks of enterprise to become one of the most successful cloakmakers in the United States, Levinsky will always remember the time when “[his] mind was full of . . . books and . . . college dreams” (170) and, in spite of decades spent in the manufacturing industry, he harbors an image of himself as a scholar until the very end of his life. The fact that he invests so much time and energy in describing this period of his history despite its relatively short duration and, practically speaking, its minimal impact on his later years is testament to the strength of his obsession: Levinsky openly states that “[he] cannot escape from [his] old self” (518) and the character’s conception of his ‘true,’ ‘authentic’ personality remains bound up in the memory of “the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue” in Antomir—that is, in the young religious scholar of days long past—who “seems to have more in common with [his] inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer” of the present (518).

Cahan’s portrayal of David Levinsky’s passionate, yet abortive attempt at acquiring a new world education betrays a fascination with the complicated interplay

between American and European educational ideals which were often in conflict, and not just with regard to the tension between traditional religious education and its secular U.S. counterpart. As in Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, there is also conflict between the Talmudic tradition and 'modern' instruction in the Russian empire, and between Eastern and Western European modes of secular learning, all of which spills over into Levinsky's experiences in New York City. At one point in the text, he comments that "there [is] an odd confusion of ideas in [his] mind" as he seeks to enter the United States' academic community but remains "ambitious to be a cultured man 'in the European way'" (163): "on the one hand," he admits, "I had a notion that to 'become an American' was the only tangible form of becoming a man of culture (for did I not regard the most refined and learned European as a 'greenhorn'?); on the other hand, the impression was deep in me that American education was a cheap machine-made product" (163). Regardless of these sentiments, and the protagonist's confused ambivalence regarding which tradition he aspires to enter, the character's obsession with education as a means of acculturation is clear – and he is not alone. A major component of the immigrant fascination with new world education, which is in many cases a preeminent feature of fiction penned by American immigrants regardless of the era in which it was written, is its facilitation of English language usage. English, in these works, is frequently viewed as a barometer of acculturation if not synonymous with the very act of Americanization itself³⁵—Rose Cohen's autobiography, for instance, states that she was "more Americanised [*sic*]" than her father because, "under pressure, [she] could converse in English a little, while he could not [speak] it at all" (152)—and the promise of "'free schooling in

³⁵ Joshua Miller discusses this phenomenon, and the modernist penchant for engaging in "novelistic acts of linguistic reposition[ing] . . . by infusing English with the words and rhythms of non-English and 'nonstandard' languages as U.S. speech" (25), in *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism*, which includes, amongst others, a section on translating between "'Englitch'" and Yiddish (227-270).

America” (194), while “a wonderful privilege” in its own right (195), was more often than not primarily a means of language acquisition with a view to social and cultural participation in the wider American sphere. This dovetailed with the prevailing attitude dictating contemporary linguistic practices in the majority of U.S. classrooms as “student bod[ies] between 1890 and 1920 [were] characterized by rapidly increasing diversity, which the schools recognized largely as an issue of language” (Montero-Sieburth & LaCelle-Peterson 305). The United States’ cultural and political aristocracy had long opined English as the language of the power elite; to learn it was to gain valuable currency enabling further trade in the American milieu, while failing to do so meant a life spent in ethnic enclaves where English was optional as a second, third, or even fourth language, so even a limited proficiency was worth fighting for if one desired experiences beyond the boundaries of the ghetto. As Cohen puts it, although her brief tenure in night school is a painful, frustrating experience marked by bitter shame at her own slow progress, she “[can] not bear to stay away” because “[she has] a feeling that the world [is] going on and [she is] being left behind” when she does not attend (198).

It is difficult to overestimate the role of language as a conceptual front upon which cultural battles are waged. “In a very real sense,” writes Marnie Holborow, “language is something about which everyone has an opinion because every speaker knows something about it. We have a deep sense of attachment to how people speak, to ways of speaking that we know or identify with” (151), because from birth human social development is in many ways dependent upon acquiring the shared linguistic frameworks which allow groups of individuals to interact in a more or less efficient manner. Raymond Williams claims that “the making and hearing of certain sounds [is] a large part of our social sense” (214), and “this profoundly social aspect of language

means that ideas held about [it] are interlaced with wider views of society” (Holborow 151). Holborow also asserts that intuitive ideas about language “constitute part of what [Antonio] Gramsci call[s] ‘common sense’” (151),³⁶ which lays bare her belief that the spoken word is absolutely central to one’s worldview, often on a subconscious level. Putting it another way, Paul Kroskrity emphatically declares that

language ideologies represent the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group. A member’s notion of what is ‘true,’ ‘morally good,’ or ‘aesthetically pleasing’ about a language and discourse are grounded in social experience and often demonstrably tied to his or her political-economic interests. (8)

Languages, then, are not “just . . . piece[s] of clothing that [can] fit indifferently as form over any content” (Gramsci 226); they “represent an integral conception of the world” (Holborow 151) which informs identity, affects social experience, and underpins citizens’ political interactions, so it is no wonder that idiomatic friction inspires rhetoric advocating—and comprising—both hegemonic and subversive interactions between national, political, and ethnic groups in conflict. Ronald Wardhaugh notes that “the modern state is involved extensively in such matters as the economy, education, security, . . . employment, government services, [and] culture,” so “it is not surprising that language matters often become important too and end up ‘politicized’ when they might not have become so in ‘simpler’ times” (22), and Dennis Baron writes that “debate over language generates passion and enmity” in America because it “has always been an important symbolic issue in the United States” (xix). Bilingualism is frequently perceived as “an affront” to the coherence of national identity, “or at best a puzzle needing to be solved” (Heller “Bilingualism”

³⁶ To avoid being vague in the application of this term, Holborow explains that Gramsci “mean[s] the largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world, a taken-for-granted world view [sic], which has been inherited from the past. Though appearing natural and self-evident, it is in fact . . . the articulation of an ideology of a specific social class in its own interests, at a specific time” (151).

156), which is a legacy of the Enlightenment-era belief, popularized by Locke, that “language is the material expression of mind” (E. Gray 96) and therefore indicative of deep-seated and potentially divisive differences encompassing intelligence, morality, work ethic, socio-familial mores, and, perhaps most importantly, fitness for self-government. This philosophy had a number of high-profile proponents, including John Adams, who believed that “the form of government has an influence upon language, and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, sentiments, and manners of the people” (J. Adams 249). There is a dark side to such a mentality, however, which posits that “nonanglophiles cannot fully understand the principles upon which the United States was founded because these principles were articulated in English” (Baron *xiii*) and thus subordinates as second class citizens those who are not fluent in the nation’s *de facto* public tongue. “Consequently,” Baron reports, “learning English is considered tantamount to Americanization” because “immigrants . . . who learn English thereby demonstrate their understanding and endorsement of the principles upon which the nation was founded” (28).

“For I . . . [Can] Write Poetry”:³⁷
Linguistic Assimilation as a Mark of Self-Worth

Enlightenment-era English propaganda was clearly successful in establishing the erroneous belief that it was, and would remain, America’s first and only truly viable language, ideologically speaking, and modern suspicion regarding bilingual or multilingual initiatives is a demonstrable product of early America’s reverence for

³⁷ Antin *The Promised Land* 170

English as “the enlightened instrument of American democracy” (Baron 28). Reflecting the popular Enlightenment view of English which affected many immigrants’ opinions of the spoken and written word through their daily interactions in the new world, Abraham Cahan has David Levinsky express the belief that “people who [are] born to speak English [are] superior beings” (*Levinsky* 171), but the author is not, of course, endorsing this statement as truthful or accurate. Rather, he is laying bare the protagonist’s awe and aspiration as an immigrant attempting acculturation in his new home, but such sentiments have, historically speaking, been drummed into prospective citizens as a matter of course. Cahan further illustrates the manner in which the primacy of English as a mark of high culture and, perhaps more importantly for the American political institution, ideological superiority crept in to color immigrants’ view of language when he has Levinsky remark on the character of Dickens’ idiom in *Dombey and Son*, the protagonist’s first experience with a novel. David is enchanted by the book’s “poetry and humor” and enthralled by “the dramatic interest of the narrative” (135), which is like nothing he has ever read, but the real draw of the text resides in the character’s “self-congratulations upon being able to read English of this sort, a state of mind which [he is] too apt to mistake for [his] raptures over Dickens.” Indeed, reiterating the supposed cultural subordination of new immigrants and reifying them as intrinsically inferior human beings, the author once again notes that “it seem[s] to [David] [the] people who [are] born to speak this language [are] of a superior race” (135), and he invokes the cultural legacy of Anglocentrism as he makes a conscious decision, one hundred and forty years after the United States’ declaration of independence, to have the aspiring scholar fixate on an English author rather than an American one. As a general, fictionalized representation of immigrant sentiment, Dickens’ “outbursts of beautiful rhetoric” in

Dombey and Son and *Nicholas Nickleby* are such that “their author [appeals] to [David] as something more than a human being” (161), with the obvious upshot being that assessments of the English language which lionize its speakers have ramifications for immigrants’ social and cultural self-worth as well. As in Cahan’s novel, echoes of this linguistically-gauged self-worth invariably made their way into a body of literature written, unsurprisingly, in the United States’ dominant *lingua franca*: Mary Antin, in her fictionalized account of childhood, for instance, recounts that she “used to watch [her] cousin Hirshel start for school in the morning, every thread of his student’s uniform, every worn copybook in his satchel, glorified in [her] envious eyes,” but soon she is “as he: aye, greater than he; for [she knows] English, and . . . [can] write poetry” (170).

As a means of acquiring the dominant local language, as well as valuable advice on American social customs, mannerisms, habits and personal hygiene, and thus facilitating a degree of Americanization difficult to achieve without proper instruction,³⁸ domestic schools represented a reality wildly divergent from most new immigrants’ experiences in the dirty tenements, laundries, sweatshops, and pushcart-lined streets of the Lower East Side and other ethnic enclaves around the United States. As one native commentator, reflecting, with his choice of words, the era’s paranoia about cultural infiltration, put it in 1926,

there is . . . only one Americanization force for these colonies, namely an efficient American public school system, not merely Americanization evening schools, but all classes of schools, beginning with the primary schools and ending with the colleges, this being necessary in order to compete successfully with the school system developed by the immigrants themselves and conducted in the spirit of preference of their own national ‘culture’ to the civilization of America. (Speek 249)

³⁸ For more on this, see Miller 53-58, wherein he cites several contemporary examples of “side-by-side translations of texts from non-English languages and pictorial lessons” which were “combined with unsubtle extralinguistic lessons” such as “exhortations to proper hygiene” (53).

The world of American education was an environment so strange and alien to immigrants that it became at times almost incomprehensible, yet, as the preceding quote, for all of its nativist overtones, implies, for many it represented the ‘true’ America (David Levinsky states in Cahan’s tale, for example, that one young character’s classroom is the “sacred source” of “‘real Yankee’” wisdom for her entire family; “everything else,” he writes, “is ‘greenhorn’” and thus subject to doubt, if not scorn; Cahan *Levinsky* 245). Young women, in particular, were acutely aware of the unique opportunities presented to them by new world education as in Eastern European Jewish communities “education was usually a luxury reserved for [women of] the middle and upper classes. Outside the cities and among poorer Jews it was considered an unnecessary waste of time. At best, girls might be taught to read Yiddish by the rabbi’s wife or in a small school for girls. Sometimes they would listen in as the boys were instructed” (Weinberg 71-72), but, by and large, they were not instructed any more than was strictly necessary. Thus Rose Cohen describes “the children on the way home from school” on New York’s Cherry Street by stating that “in their white summery dresses and with books under their arms, they [appear] to [her] like wonderful little beings of a world entirely different from [her own]. [She] watche[s] and envie[s] them” (90), and she is not alone in this envy. As when Alice Kessler-Harris writes that “to finish high school, even to attend college became a single-minded obsession for those who wanted to shed the greenhorn image” (Introduction *xxxi*), envy of those “neat and stylish,” “soft-spoken and educated” Americans who populated the halls of such institutions (*xxxi*) drove many immigrants to fixate on that world and fight for admission to it as resolutely as one fighting for their very survival. As we will see in Chapter Four, contemporary philosopher and educator John Dewey advocated using schools and other local civic organizations to

encourage informed democratic participation, but for immigrants driven to become part of America's emerging middle class "the importance of schooling had less to do with participation in civic life than the economic benefits of becoming a trained and credentialed professional" (Koritz 120). Indeed, in a bid to "claim their share of the distant, ordered world" of the middle class (120), ambitious non-native individuals like Anzia Yezierska struggled to extricate themselves from the dirty, crowded and clamorous enclaves in which they found themselves after arriving in the United States, and this struggle, in which education played a pivotal role, can be readily observed in their writing.

In *The Promised Land*, Mary Antin's deliberate and self-avowed revisionism—the main attribute of her work stimulating debate over its merit as a 'fictionalized' autobiography and inspiring Magdalena Zaborowska to treat Mary, the story's protagonist, and Antin, its author, as separate entities—gives rise to a claim which calls attention to the role of education as a prime acculturative force in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America. Near the end of the narrative, the author inscribes "a 'biographical' lie about the honors taken by Mary at Barnard College" (Zaborowska 66). The authorial Antin "never took a degree," but "her heroine-narrator, who is supposed to be telling a 'true' story, 'lies' to the reader" in order to emphasize the success of the educational component of her Americanization (66), which implies that Antin views education as the key to her life lived as an American, as does her intimation that graduating from Latin School—that bastion of arrogant western intellectual autocracy—is her final initiation into the American way of life which removes any lingering traces of ethnic and cultural difference. She writes that "one of the inherent disadvantages of premature biography"—that is, of a life's story recounted before its final days (the author claims that "a proper

autobiography is a death-bed confession” and admits, in the introduction, that she is “not yet thirty” at the time of her work’s composition; Antin 2)—“is that it cannot go to the natural end of the story” (281). The narrator is thus “threatened” with “difficulty” but “[does] not need to tax [her] judgment to fix the proper stopping-place” because

having traced the way an immigrant child may take from the ship through the public schools, passed on from hand to hand by the ready teachers; through free libraries and lecture halls, inspired by every occasion of civic consciousness; dragging through the slums the weight of private disadvantage, but heartened for the effort by public opportunity; welcomed at a hundred doors of instruction, initiated with pomp and splendor and flags unfurled; seeking, in American minds, the American way, and finding it in the thoughts of the noble,—striving against the odds of foreign birth and poverty, and winning, through the use of abundant opportunity, a place as enviable as that of any native child,—having traced the footsteps of the young immigrant almost to the college gate, the rest of the course may be left to the imagination. (281)

“Let us say,” she continues, “that from Latin School on I lived very much as my American schoolmates lived, having overcome my foreign idiosyncrasies, and the rest of my outward adventures [one] may read in any volume of American feminine statistics.” Such a conclusion “incite[s] the reader’s curiosity rather than appeasing it” (Zaborowska 67), but it comports with the author’s desire to present a life—though not necessarily her own life, as evidenced by the “‘biographical’ lie” about attending Barnard College (Zaborowska 66)—“typical” of an immigrant experience which undergoes acculturation successfully enough to dissolve into the most banal of “American . . . statistics” (Antin 281). Nevertheless, Antin ignores a fundamental aspect of immigrant life when she makes this claim: regardless of the circumstances surrounding emigration, the number of other exiles undertaking similar journeys, and the strength and vibrancy of local diasporic communities, the act of leaving one’s home country and permanently settling in another is an intensely personal experience

the full extent of which cannot be conveyed by numbers alone, and which rarely, if ever, results in the sort of seamless integration into the host culture so happily depicted in her text.

Antin's claim that the remainder of her life mirrors the preponderance of contemporary American women's and is therefore readily available to the reader as anonymous statistical data constitutes an ambiguous ending, but it does so in a manner which clashes with the ambiguous endings present in texts written by authors such as Anzia Yezierska. Antin mentions statistics—but refrains from quoting them—a number of times in *The Promised Land*, and these allusions are frequently linked to her earliest days in America, as when she claims that her narration could “borrow” “sundry . . . unprejudiced and critical observers[']” “statistics . . . to fill the gaps in [her] recollections” (144), and to education, as when she writes that “it is not worth while [*sic*] to refer to voluminous school statistics to see just how many ‘green’ pupils entered school last September, not knowing the days of the week in English, who next February will be declaiming patriotic verses in honor of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln” (163) (“it is enough,” she declares, “to know that this hundred-fold miracle is common to . . . schools in every part of the United States where immigrants are received”). However, Antin's assertion that “the individual . . . is a creature unknown to the statistician” (144) undercuts the positivity of her ending and the text's conclusion, which reduces the narrator from unique personality to anonymous datum, implies a profound loss of identity which grates against Yezierska's heroines' intense desires for individuation, as well as against their need for earnest, fervent, and vocal assertions of being. The strident voices of Yezierska's immigrant women, screaming into the void separating their world from the American realm they so long to penetrate and win over, do not long hold Antin's rosy,

picturesque view of the American educational system, and they would shudder at the thought of being reduced to existing as part of a statistical matrix.

Antin, or at least Mary, “the heroine-narrator,” as Zaborowska dubs her (66), is more successful in broaching the American sphere than are her Yezierskan counterparts because she is willing—on the surface, at least—to accept her ‘proper’ place in the American social hierarchy; at the very end of her ‘autobiographical’ text, for example, she claims that she “can conjure up no better symbol of the genuine, practical equality of all our citizens than the Hale House Natural History Club, which played an important part in [her] final emancipation from the slums,” but she openly states that she “was regarded as a plaything by the [club’s] serious members” (283). The narration states that “the attention and kindness [the club’s members] lavished on [her] had a deep significance” because “every one of those earnest men and women unconsciously taught [Mary her] place in the Commonwealth, as the potential equal of the best of them” (283), but this is a barbed compliment representing, at best, a quintessentially Pyrrhic victory. The emphasis in this sentence must be on the word *potential*, which is markedly different from *actual*, and the observation that the club’s members “taught [Mary her] place” is a wry one indeed. Subsequent statements reveal that “few of [Antin’s] friends in the club . . . could have rightly defined their benevolence toward [her]” (283)—“perhaps,” the writer claims, “some of them thought they befriended me for charity’s sake, because I was a starved waif from the slums,” or “imagined they enjoyed my society, because I had much to say for myself, and a gay manner of meeting life”—and she remains, in this context, an exotic representation of the ‘other’ encountered as a novelty and treated, more than anything, as a mere entertainment. The recollection of the club—and the text itself—ends with the author “[parting] from her friends” “at the Public Library” (symbolic, as well, of

the friends and family members she leaves behind by undertaking a modern American education), whereupon she “has a vision of [her]self, the human creature, emerging from the dim places where the torch of history has never been, creeping slowly into the light of civilized existence, pushing more steadily forward to the broad plateau of modern life, and leaping, at last, strong and glad, to the intellectual summit of the latest century” (285). But this lofty rhetoric, inspired by the thematic threads of knowledge and education which wind themselves through her work, is undercut by the protagonist’s experiences in the club itself. The “genuine, practical equality” of the United States, as taught to her by the “earnest men and women” of the Hale House Natural History Club, is one in which Mary Antin is “a plaything” amongst Americans even as she believes they have “opened their homes to [her]” as a “foster sister” (283).

When one reads *The Promised Land*’s conclusion in this manner, the author’s final, oft-quoted line, which boldly proclaims that “mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future” (286), is specious indeed. Antin’s heroine uses education to elide ethnic and cultural difference, allowing her to enter into the ranks of Boston’s upper-class social set, but by separating herself from the story’s protagonist Antin’s authorial voice can introduce doubt as to the endeavor’s outcome. In fact, the character’s post-Latin School status as nothing more than a numerical statistic, her ‘lie’ about Barnard College, and the final chapter’s “practical equality” (283), which reifies the heroine as an ethnic novelty amongst her ‘peers,’ imbue the text with pronounced elements of satire. This satire, which resides amid numerous paeans to the American way of life, is gently conveyed when compared to works penned by many of Antin’s contemporaries, but it is nonetheless present and complements her occasional chastisements of American close-mindedness. The

writer's favorite tactic, of course, is to directly challenge her American readers' preconceptions about new immigrants, as when she exhorts them to ask "What if the cross-legged tailor is supporting a boy in college who will one day mend your state constitution for you? What if the ragpicker's daughters are hastening over the ocean to teach your children in the public schools?" (145), and it is important to note that the great majority of these challenges fall in line with her encomiastic rendering of the United States' educational system as being a grand, democratic leveler. The emblematic nature of language, of communication within a wider American context, as being one of, if not *the* most important product of an American education forms the cornerstone of many an immigrant narrative, and in this regard Antin is no different from her peers: "think," she implores, "every time you pass the greasy alien on the street, that he was born thousands of years before the oldest native American; and he may have something to communicate to you, when you two shall have learned a common language" (144-145). As is frequently the case in such appeals, the vague "something" waiting to be communicated is a conversation about life, community, and humanity, and the writer is careful to point out that *both* parties must learn "a common language" before their discourse can begin in earnest (144-145). Sean Butler contends that "Antin's . . . rhetoric reveals her faith in the idea that within the American scene, education can afford anyone the authority to participate in public discourses of power" (64), and addressing these discourses is the primary goal of her narrative.

Although *The Promised Land* occasionally drifts into whimsical, nostalgic territory, it is at its heart a text about gaining cultural currency which can then be used to trade in an American milieu dominated by factions variously known as 'Anglocentric,' 'Anglo-Saxon,' or 'White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.' In *American*

Barrish writes that

because of the value that Jewish culture has always accorded to intellect and learning, Jewish-American immigrant literature foregrounds, more so than any other immigrant literatures, the male immigrant's loss upon arrival in America of anything that might previously have served him as intellectual capital. (77)

"The just-arrived Jewish immigrant," he contends, "thus acts as an almost ideal illustration of the supposed necessity to earn one's intellectual capital for oneself in America," and the texts examined in this chapter, while differing in some respects, are all preoccupied with the pursuit of such capital as will allow their protagonists to achieve their desired degree of acculturation. The pursuit of intellectual capital takes many forms in these texts, and, in certain cases, endeavors to redefine the very nature of education itself as the characters deal with varying degrees of determination and obsession. Abraham Cahan's male protagonists, many of whom are former religious scholars, attempt to translate their foreign human capital into new world settings and, failing to make such translations successfully, gravitate toward American academic environments as a means of acculturating because they have previously viewed scholarship, in its sacred form, as a defining feature of their personality. Invariably, they alienate themselves from their past as secular, new world learning seduces them into apostasy by supplanting Talmudic Judaism as the locus of their religious devotion, and, subsequently, they embark on a life of atheism. When such protagonists are encountered as elderly men they frequently lament the loss of some vague, ethereal part of their identity and indulge in reverie that leaves them "suffering . . . in a state of nostalgia" (Marovitz "Lonely New Americans" 200); occasionally, they try to reconnect with their former selves by self-consciously rekindling the fires of the faith

which sustained them in their youth, but neither their education nor their religion are capable of surviving emigration intact—nor are they reconcilable in the United States—and the characters remain fundamentally unfulfilled. Although not discussed at length in this chapter, a number of Anzia Yeziarska's heroines are subject to similar fates as they pursue collegiate education as a means of escaping the oppressive patriarchy, poverty, and filth of the Jewish immigrant ghetto while acquiring the decidedly 'uptown' American sociocultural and linguistic frameworks which will allow them to tell their stories in a manner capable of touching the hearts and minds of the middle classes. Their "idealized . . . vision[s] of school," however, "[cannot] possibly be sustained in the reality of the classroom" (Oster 188) and their bids for suburban acceptance leave them feeling by turns angry, indignant, disillusioned, and alone – yet, like Cahan's "lonely new Americans" (Marovitz "Lonely New Americans" 210), neither can they find solace by returning to the immigrant past which they have so energetically struggled to put behind them.

Mary Antin's 'autobiography,' which courts controversy by intentionally blurring the line between fiction and memoir, occasionally borders on mawkish, propagandistic patriotism, but her paeans to Americanization couch a firm belief in the U.S. educational system as opening the door to American society at large even if she herself did not achieve the academic honors ascribed to Mary, the story's heroine. "For the turn of the century Anglo-American 'New Woman' the source of freedom, of a language of self affirmation [*sic*], was in education" (Kalfopoulou 50)—indeed, "in her own mind and the minds of her contemporaries, education constituted the New Woman's most salient characteristic—and her first self-conscious demand" (Smith-Rosenberg 247)—and in this regard Antin is consciously mimicking the thoroughly Americanized 'New Woman' mentality. The author is "very interested in displaying

her fluency [in English],” which is a product of her academic career, “as one of several interwoven properties which she shares with native-born Americans” (Butler 73), but it is important to note that her childhood in Poland comprises nearly half of *The Promised Land’s* narrative and this combination illuminates her journey of linguistic acculturation as one characterized by a desire to earn the intellectual currency, and credibility, which will allow her to successfully communicate to her western audience some truths about immigrants which will encourage them to revise their preconceptions. Modern memoirist Richard Rodriguez—though stung by “the unanticipated costs of education, [such as] the price paid by families who feel estranged from their educated children because they no longer have much in common” (Oster 196), and later disillusioned with academia—casts American instruction in a similar light and addresses the complex interplay between identity, education and memory in *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, and Eva Hoffman’s autobiography, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, though published nearly eighty years later, bears a subtitle (notable for its immediacy as “to speak of life *with* a language, or *by means of* it, is to keep language more distant, more separate from the self, than a life *in* it”; Oster 69) which links it to Antin’s as well as offering a poignant insight into its author’s acculturative journey. As with Antin, whose “second language can serve as a visible, verifiable record of her” ““second birth”” and “intellectual growth” in the United States (Butler 68), “the most acute rites of passage [Hoffman] had to go through in her new country involved a linguistic rebirth and a recreation of herself as a person speaking, writing, thinking, and, finally, even dreaming in English” (Zaborowska 4-5). Rose Cohen asserts that “a child that [comes] to this country and [begins] to go to school ha[s] taken the first step into the New World” while “the child that [is] put into the [sweat]shop remain[s] in

the old environment with the old people, held back by the old traditions, . . . [and] by illiteracy” (246), and the recurring theme of education in immigrant texts—even when that education is thwarted, aborted, or remains a distant, unattainable dream—bears witness to this attitude’s strength and prevalence. Of course, the availability of so many immigrant texts written in English is also an indication of the lure of linguistic acculturation as a means of gaining the cultural capital needed to ‘tell one’s story’ to an American audience.

In a section of *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (2000) entitled “From Educational to Political Americanization,” Desmond King reports that in the early twentieth century James Davis, the United States’ Secretary of Labor under Presidents Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, frequently “stressed the connection between the acquisition of language and political beliefs” (101), and he was not alone in his belief in this Enlightenment era supposition. Such rhetoric inspired—and continues to inspire—a number of American movements which maintained that English was the foremost language of democracy and which, as a result, were mistrustful of ethnic individuals who had, if anything, a limited grasp of that selfsame language. In response to this and other prejudices, numerous immigrants sought to avail themselves of the education necessary to acquire a working knowledge of English, and the language became emblematic of the Americanization process as a whole. Monica Heller and Marilyn Martin-Jones maintain that “linguistic practices are central to struggles over controlling the production and distribution of resources and over the legitimation of relations of power, which are, in the end, what such control amounts to” (2); “all our debates about who should speak what and how are really,” they argue, “debates over who gets to decide what counts as *legitimate language*” (2), and

the issue is principally one of what ways using language, what kinds of language practices, are valued and considered good, normal, appropriate, or correct in the framework of ideological orientations connected to social, economic, and political interests. By exercising control over the value of linguistic resources, . . . groups simultaneously regulate access to other resources (such as knowledge, friendship, or material goods) and legitimate the social order that permits them to do so. (2)

Furthermore, such debates “are particularly important in education, which is a key site for defining legitimate language” as well as for “constructing what counts as knowledge, what counts as displaying knowledge, and who may define and display knowledge and for evaluating forms of knowledge, their display, and their performers” (3). With all of this informing ethnic texts, and with America’s long history of ideo-linguistic hegemony, the immigrant preoccupation with American schools is understandable, as are their creators’ decisions to portray the pursuit of higher education by characters such as Shaya Golub, David Levinsky and Sara Smolinsky as equal parts determination and obsession and to render the classroom a “site of the most powerful contestation” (Oster 193). Assessments of education and linguistic interaction in the vein of those made by Heller and Martin-Jones also go a long way toward explaining why the American academic system plays such a prominent role in novels, shorts stories and autobiographies written by immigrants during the early twentieth century, especially those penned in English. The immigrant quest for education, after all, was in this era not merely a quest for knowledge, intellectual stimulation or professional credentials, but an attempt to amass valuable—and elusive—cultural capital; it was, more than anything else, an attempt at acculturation and a bid to gain the acceptance of a dominant culture which was by turns arrogant, unaccepting, suspicious of, and openly hostile to ethnic individuals, because even a limited degree of acceptance increased one’s opportunities to share his or her story.

CHAPTER FOUR

“‘The Democracy of Beauty’”:³⁹ Consumerism and Civic Identity in the New World

The United States of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was one of comprehensive industrial, economic and social change (Klein 2-4). The Industrial Revolution, enabled by what Mary Klein dubs “the power revolution” which saw the widespread introduction of fuels such as coal, oil and gas (2) and similar revolutions in transportation and communication (3), had profoundly altered the way Americans lived, worked, and procured goods and services. One major consequence of America’s industrialization was that it “shifted the [nation’s] demographic balance toward urban areas” (153)—by the turn of the century “life . . . centered on the metropolis” (Ewen 21) and “the city was the new frontier” (22)—and manufacturing, as a result, became a major source of employment, particularly for immigrants (24-25). In addition, “factories and other heavily capitalized places of large-scale employment changed the social relations between worker and employer, creating new social classes in the process” (Pollard 375), immigration debates raged and, after 1914, the “First World War increased racial animosity in the United States” (King 169) and forever altered western economic and geopolitical interactions. Such debates, and many contemporary changes in labor, housing and education, were a direct result of the largest wave of immigration the U.S. had ever seen, while an emerging urban

³⁹ Yezierska *Salome of the Tenements* 27

consumer culture was codifying ‘white’ America into an increasingly homogenous group that “denied [new immigrants] social acceptance even if allowing them financial achievement” (Koritz 112).

John Dewey, one of America’s leading contemporary philosophers, writes that “the use of machinery in production and commerce was followed by the creation of new powerful social conditions, personal opportunities and wants” (*Public* 89), resulting in a “social revolution” that fostered “a philosophy of individualism” (98), and Ewen reports that “new immigrants were caught up in [the] process of urban transformation; their story illuminates not merely a change from old to new, but a change in the fabric of American society and culture” (24). These changes, along with contributing to the obsolescence of the melting pot myth wherein immigrants Anglicized, or Anglo-Saxonized, in order to become American despite the myth’s promise of plurality, were also reshaping the very definition of U.S. citizenship. Discussing the process of Americanization undergone (or, perhaps more accurately, attempted) by many immigrants during this era is difficult because Americanization can be a deceptive term. “It implies exchanging one nationality for another,” Ewen observes, “but it is more than that: it is also the initiation of people into an emerging industrial and consumer society.” “The process to which [the] term is applied,” she continues,

had an impact that went beyond the immigrants themselves and touched the lives of most of the people who might be called Americans, transforming the way of life of a large proportion of the population. And this was part of the still larger process of industrialization: people, whether “native” or immigrant, whose lives were rooted in agricultural or small-scale industrial production found themselves, by the beginning of the twentieth century, embroiled in a new and unfamiliar social universe. The growth of large-scale mass production and the emergence of a national market for goods together laid down the outlines of a modern consumer culture, one with which we [in the present] . . . have become all too familiar. (15)

As this passage illustrates, Ewen's assessment of the Americanization process encompasses more than just the political indoctrination and naturalization of recently-arrived immigrants and the realignment of culturally-inherited social mores that King describes in *Making Americans*. It includes, as this chapter also attempts to argue about the works of Anzia Yezierska by using her most overtly consumerist-themed novel, *Salome of the Tenements*, as an example, initiation into an emergent industrial American consumerism, the ramifications of which affected the entire nation as they altered the very nature of what it meant to be "American" and were not, as is usually considered to be the case, limited strictly to new immigrants. Likewise, Walter Lippmann's statement, made in *Public Opinion* (1922), that "Americanization . . . is superficially at least the substitution of American for European stereotypes" (47) hinges on the word "superficially," highlighting, without benefit of the historical hindsight employed by Ewen, the unplumbed depths of the process and its critical reliance on "stereotypes." In light of these comments on the nature of the Americanization process, assessing the term 'American' as it applies—or does not apply—to individuals during this period of history is problematic as well. What had heretofore been defined as a political status granting certain inalienable rights was changing in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century; it was becoming a way of life rather than a governmental or civic affiliation. As "urban America emerged as the heart of a powerful new ethos that defined progress in material terms" (Klein 153), becoming 'American,' for many immigrants, was more about fitting in to a particularly American consumer culture—about adhering to Lippmann's "American . . . stereotypes" (*Public Opinion* 47)—than about attaining a specific legal or political status or exercising civic rights as part of the country's body politic. The consumer culture to which they aspired was rapidly adopting fashion as one of its

most visible signifiers, dictating, on the part of those desiring inclusion, the need for uniquely American modes of dress and ensuring that one's garments, whether conforming to the fashionable mainstream or contributing to one's exclusion from it, became a tangible, physical link to the emergent—and thoroughly consumerist—*nouveau* Americanism of the early twentieth century.

Many Jewish immigrant writers have explored the transformative potential of clothing in their fiction, and while the motivations and religious ramifications of changing one's outward appearance upon immigrating to the United States have been discussed in previous chapters, little has been said thus far about the commodification of projected appearance in early-twentieth century American culture and the politicization of consumption as it relates to the purchase and exhibition of clothing in immigrant narratives. Katherine Stubbs writes that Yeziarska, in particular, “displays an acute awareness of the role of commodities in the lives of recent immigrants” (“Material” 157), and this observation is well-founded; the acquisition of goods often runs parallel to, and complements, instances of acculturation and integration in post-immigration plotlines. Socialist connotations of the work notwithstanding, the very title of Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* implies that ethnicity and purchasing power go hand in hand in the United States (which circumstance the author attacks with Marxist ideology in the course of the text), lending credence to the clothing-as-acculturation paradigm in which mass produced garments supplanted homemade clothing, and thus became signifiers of economic and social status, for those who could afford them. This cultural phenomenon was part of a larger shift in American culture—Schreier explains that “as Americans moved from a culture of production to a culture of consumption, clothes were more frequently bought than made” (68)—but it was also a natural outgrowth of Jewish economic practices as “the market [was] the

pulse, the meeting ground, the center of action” in the eastern European *shtetl* (Roskies & Roskies 25). “Without a market,” claims one contemporary account, “all the Jews would starve to death and all the peasants would be naked and barefoot” (25), and such a mentality took on additional significance in the new world metropolis where “urban dwellers usually lacked the time, materials, or inclination to make what they needed, and nearly everything could be found in the city’s shops, stores, and marketplaces” (Klein 179). “The local market was an important institution in [American] ethnic neighborhoods,” writes Ewen (171); “it provided people with employment and gave them a place to shop within the context of their own language and culture. The local markets of New York City were the place where ethnic needs and the growing domestic and international economy met.” Likewise, due to the economic, dietary and linguistic pressures of acculturation and the perseverance of long-standing European gender roles that delegated shopping to the female members of the household, local markets both defined and were defined by gendered cultural identity. Due to poor storage in the tenements “food had to be bought in small quantities on a daily basis” (172) and, as such,

immigrant women had daily encounters with the market. They bought food, furniture, and clothing from the small neighborhood shops, stands, and pushcarts, finding those stores that specialized in the foods that formed the basis of culture. Jewish women patronized kosher butchers, and the kosher meat industry was a substantial local industry, closely linked to the tenement district. As in Eastern Europe, Friday was the busiest day in the Jewish marketplace. (171)

The gendered and ethnic character of neighborhood markets ensured that buying such goods became a politicized venture for immigrants despite its locality and, inevitably, certain commodities became emblematic of social and economic status. “Meat,” for example, “largely unavailable to poor people in Europe, was now widely available in cheap cuts, and the social meaning of the new standard of life was measured by the

increased availability of this precious commodity” (Ewen 172)⁴⁰ – a phenomenon limned by Anzia Yeziarska when she presents descriptions of food to her readers (*Bread Givers* 167-169, *Salome* 49, *How I Found America* 200-201, to name but a few). Likewise, as Jews were part of a “patriarchal, preindustrial” society in eastern Europe (Ewen 30) the purchase of mass-produced clothing in America—especially by Jewish women—was an exercise in the liberties and economic opportunities supposedly available to all in the new world. While there are many examples of conspicuous consumption present in their literary output, in her article “Reading Material: Contextualizing Clothing in the Work of Anzia Yeziarska,” Stubbs contends that

for Yeziarska, as for her contemporaries . . . Mary Antin and Abraham Cahan, the commodity that most visibly signifies the seductive power of the early-twentieth century American marketplace is clothing, the factory-produced “ready-made” garments available at low prices to the masses. In the work of these writers, ready-made clothing is prized for its almost magical transformative power, its aura of instant respectability; it functions as testimony of an immigrant’s new American status, the external proof of economic and cultural viability. (157)

These authors’ literary preoccupation with clothing, fashion and consumerism belies an intense desire to explore, and hopefully surmount, the hierarchical class divisions inherent in the American cultural landscape of the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, Yeziarska’s frequent references to that era’s consumptive fashion milieu emphasize a heretofore under-examined aspect of the writer’s work: while many critics have been content to discuss the author’s “feminist and political concerns” (Okonkwo 129), and, in particular, her “exploration of the difficult position of women in traditionally patriarchal Jewish families” (Stubbs “Material” 157), much

⁴⁰ see also Reczyńska “America and the Ruhr Basin in the Expectations of Polish Peasant Migrants” 91

can—and should—be said about her “fascination with the American class system and its signifiers” (157).

In Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), Sonya Vrunsky tells immigrant-*cum*-designer Jacques Hollins, who has made a gown for her free of charge, ““you made me look like Fifth Avenue-born. Only—I don't want to have the tied-up manners of a lady”” (26). Tellingly, the individually tailored outfit with which she is provided is automatically, even subconsciously, associated with a New York neighborhood known for its fashionable, native-born affluence, with further links drawn between garmentry and ‘American’ personality traits. The enthusiastic statement of appreciation, followed by Sonya's implicit criticism of the seemingly American or ““Fifth Avenue”” quality of restraint (that location being the stereotypical embodiment of affluent American ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ for the immigrant), signifies the woman's desire to transgress the social boundaries set for her and maintained, to a degree, by the jealously-guarded exclusivity of fashion, but it also betrays the character's typically Yeziarskan desire to strike a balance which accommodates those traits learned in (Yeziarska might say ‘inherited from’) the ghetto and those cultivated in upper-class society. On the one hand, Vrunsky wishes to appear American—an aspiration fulfilled, in part, by Hollins' artful creativity—and, on the other, she hopes to retain her individuality, seen in this case as being tied to the “spontaneous and unrepressed emotionalism” inherent in her immigrant nature “but foreign to the habits of emotional restraint nurtured in Anglo-Saxon families” (Koritz 120). Hollins responds by telling her that ““you don't have to be a second-hand pattern of a person—when you can be your own free, individual self”” (Yeziarska *Salome* 27), simultaneously likening Sonya's immigrant past to ““second-hand”” goods and emphasizing the acquisition of property as being a vital, if not essential,

part of the Americanization process. Indeed, in the world of the novel Hollins' dress gives Vrunsky power over her surroundings where she has previously had very little: her use of the garment to manipulate her landlord (49-55) and, subsequently, to attract and enthrall millionaire philanthropist John Manning, is presaged by the frank expression of self-assurance she utters upon donning it for the first time in the designer's studio. "I feel I can conquer kingdoms in this dress" she tells her benefactor (26); "could any man alive refuse me any wish if I came to him in this beautifulness?" To fully comprehend the importance of these statements, we must first understand their social and economic context.

"Jewish involvement in clothing production," writes Stubbs, "dates back several centuries and was an indirect result of a set of legal restrictions governing Jewish life in the Eastern European Pale of Settlement" ("Material" 160). Jews were prohibited from farming the land, relying instead on income from the production of hand-crafted goods and petty commerce to support their families (160), and those in sartorial trades—taking advantage of one of the professions left relatively unrestricted by the Russian government—comprised a comparatively large percentage of the workforce. By the end of the nineteenth century, the tailored garment industry employed more Jewish individuals in eastern Europe than all other occupations save trade and commerce (Glenn 20) and, concurrently, "by the time Russian Jews started arriving in the United States in large numbers in the late 1880s and 1890s, demand for skilled and semi-skilled workers in the American garment industry was rapidly increasing" (Stubbs "Material" 160). Earlier generations of German Jews, through innovative and successful entrepreneurship, had helped build the industrial clothing trade into an integral part of America's east coast economy, especially in New York City – and, consequently, they had also laid the groundwork for what would become a

major influx of eastern European Jewish garment workers in later decades (Glenn 20). The coincidence of a booming American industry and a surplus of religious and political refugees versed in related trades fueled the factory sector's growth as Jewish economic conditions deteriorated in Russia and word of the job opportunities available in the United States spread through the Pale of Settlement. Barbara Schreier contextualizes the situation when she notes that "the immigrants who came to America at the turn of the century arrived at a crucial time in the history of clothing manufacture. The unprecedented expansion of the ready-to-wear clothing industry played a major role in the rapid shift in American capitalism from an agrarian to an industrial nation" (68) and the influx of eastern European Jews supplied manufacturers with human grist for the proverbial economic mill. Ultimately, when combined with the foreign recruiting efforts of American industry (Ewen 55), this resulted in a somewhat symbiotic relationship between American clothing manufacturers and immigrant laborers – although, in light of the often ethically questionable treatment of recent arrivals by U.S. manufacturers (25), it might be more appropriate to label such a relationship parasitic or predatory.

Spurred on by the growing demand for ready-made goods and the seemingly torrential influx of cheap, expendable labor, the industry continued to balloon throughout the New Immigration period. According to Sanford Marovitz, "sweatshop clothing manufacturing was the most prominent and lucrative industry of the ghetto at the turn of the century" (197), by which time New York's factories produced "three-quarters of all women's clothing in the country and most of the men's clothing as well" (Ewen 24-25). As a result, the character of the industry's workforce was markedly ethnic: "almost forty percent of New York City's garment workers were Jews from Russia" in the earliest years of the twentieth century (Stubbs "Material"

161) and between 1900 and 1920 the industry remained a critical source of employment for immigrants from the Pale of Settlement (Glenn 90), which ensured that it was inextricably linked to the Lower East Side's Jewish immigrant community. In *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, Elizabeth Ewen reports on the number of females engaged in factory labor during this era and on the character of their roles in the gendered workplace, writing that "by 1910 women made up over 70 percent of the garment industry workforce. The sexual hierarchy that had developed gave men the most privileged positions and women were the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. By 1913 over 56 percent of these workers were Jewish . . . and about 50 percent were under twenty years old" (25). Subsequently, describing the workforce's organization "along gender lines," she notes that "immigrant men were cutters and pressers; immigrant daughters were operatives in small shops and factories; married women were at the bottom of the ladder, doing finishing work at home" (122), and in such a climate it was not unusual for entire families to be employed in the field in form or another. With many women laboring at home in one of over 13,000 tenements licensed by the State Department of Labor's Bureau of Factory Inspection (122)—Ewen states that "in 1902 the New York City Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that there were between 25,000 and 30,000 homeworkers" in that locale, "'seven-ninths'" of whom were female, with "'six-sevenths of these women work[ing] on clothing'" (122)—the trade became even more pervasive as it encroached on immigrant families' living spaces and was integrated into their daily domestic routines. With so many factors affecting the growth and profitability of the manufacturing sector, it seems inevitable that the politics of race, class and gender, as well as those of economics and immigration, would intersect dramatically in New York's garment industry in the years before 1924's Johnson-Reed Act effectively

blocked the importation of eastern European labor. This inexorable convergence colors many of the period's immigrant narratives, be they fictional or autobiographical, shapes contemporary journalistic writings and labor debates, and informs much of the current scholarship surrounding that era's cultural and literary history. It also gives rise to modern examinations of the socioeconomic dimensions of clothing and its production in the early years of the twentieth century because, as Stubbs relates, "historically, many Russian Jewish immigrants were both producers and consumers of ready-made clothing; for those immigrants, clothing often became an arena of highly-charged and conflicting significance, alternately a site of intense struggle and a source of pleasure" ("Material" 157).

Illustrating the ties between ethnicity, economics and civics during this period, Matthew Jacobson argues that "the contending forces that have fashioned and refashioned whiteness in the United States . . . are capitalism (with its insatiable appetite for cheap labor) and republicanism (with its imperative of responsible citizenship)" (*Whiteness* 13). 'Whiteness,' as used in this context, was necessary for both political and cultural enfranchisement in the early-twentieth century and was only partially applicable to eastern European Jews, so this observation is particularly salient. Jacobson's claim emphasizes the manner in which, historically speaking, the politicization of economics and ethnicity go hand-in-hand, and the production and workforce statistics listed in the previous paragraph, as staggering as they are, relay a simple truth about American and Jewish immigrant culture at the dawn of the twentieth century: clothing, by the early 1900s, was thoroughly charged with political, economic and sexual meaning and was ripe for discussion in a critical context. "The ready-made garment," Stubbs contends, "appeared to have a radical impact, both materially and ideologically."

Materially, the mass production of clothing in standardized styles meant that many members of even the lowest classes of society in urban centers could afford to purchase new clothing. Ideologically, the ready-made garment seemed to make possible a form of egalitarianism, an equal access to attractive commodities. But at the historical moment when the technology of mass-produced fashion began, there was a simultaneous institutionalization of exclusivity, the creation of the figure of the haute couture designer. (“Material” 161-162)

Ewen concurs and elaborates on the “institutionalization of exclusivity” by claiming that, although an emerging “urban mass culture carved out public spaces that made possible a limited degree of cultural interaction” between ethnically and economically disparate groups, the “urban consumer economy created distinct classes” which were “geographically set apart” (Ewen 24). Despite this definite separation of classes, however, the lure of consumerism’s potential for the establishment of Stubbs’ “egalitarianism” through “equal access to attractive commodities” (“Material” 161) was so powerful that, “compelled by necessity and desire, young immigrant women were seduced by the offerings of mass production” (Ewen 25). Indeed, as Barbara Schreier notes, the mass production of clothing did in fact succeed in blurring the lines of stratification in America’s economic and social systems in the early twentieth century (68) due to the subsequent “adaptability of dress and its ability to transcend and alter an image” (4), as well as allowing working class women to engage the “gender, class, and ethnic exclusions that [they] . . . experienced daily, in a society which saw the heroic worker as male, the heroic woman as middle-class, and the heroic American as a native-born Anglo Saxon” (Enstad 750). However, as Stubbs observes, this obfuscation of class lines also served to reify what the wealthy saw as “the threat of the ready-made” and precipitated the emergence of the *couturier* as “a way to redraw rapidly dissolving boundaries between the elite and the common, the exclusive and the vulgar” (“Material” 162), all of which Yezierska addresses in

Salome of the Tenements. Whereas in other texts the writer uses characters employed in the garment trade to present clothing as emblematic of “the disheartening fixity of an exploitative American economic system,” in *Salome* Yeziarska depicts a young woman with an intimate fascination with, if not an erotic fixation on clothing. Clothing, in the novel, thus becomes the primary medium through which the author explores the protagonist’s attempts to “transgress and transcend” relevant social and economic hierarchies in her quest to combat American cultural oppression (157).

Amy Koritz claims that “for Yeziarska’s generation of immigrants, consumerism and the success that enabled it were less ends in themselves than a manifestation of Americanness” (121), and this assertion is supported by Yeziarska’s creation of the character of Sonya Vrunsky. Vrunsky, as Koritz writes of her creator, “[does] not see becoming American as a political, or even a community, endeavor so much as an act of self-fashioning” (120):

as opposed to definitions of citizenship that considered it primarily a legal status, the exercise of special obligations and duties (to vote, to obey the law), or a form of virtue (as in acts of civil disobedience), for the characters in Yeziarska’s fiction, American citizenship is a lifestyle. To become American was to enter into a lifestyle of middle-class consumerism, with the aesthetic tastes, personal habits, and modes of interpersonal interaction appropriate to that market segment. (121)

This “self-fashioning” (120) is what Sonya has, quite literally, undertaken with the help of her designer. Indeed, the occasion of her final dress fitting with Hollins becomes an opportunity for the character to ruminate on the very nature of government and citizenship. ““Talk about democracy,”” she laughs,

“all I want is to be able to wear silk stockings and Paris hats the same as Mrs. Astorbilt, and then it wouldn’t bother me if we have Bolshevism or Capitalism, or if the democrats or the republicans win. Give me only *the democracy of beauty* and I’ll leave the fight for government democracy to politicians and educated old maids.” (Yeziarska *Salome* 27; emphasis added)

These musings, made while wearing her new, elegant, and comparatively understated attire (understatement, in counterpoint to the garish working-class styles which characterize immigrant finery elsewhere in the novel—see, for example, the social farce of the Vrunsky-Manning wedding reception on pages 117-130—being the quality both Vrunsky and Hollins consider the quintessence of upper-class American fashion), serve as a fitting description of the character’s overall civic mentality despite their innocuous flippancy. Though made in an offhand, extemporaneous manner, such comments form, in context, the ideological bedrock of Sonya Vrunsky’s philosophy. The “‘Mrs. Astorbilt’” mentioned is little more than Vrunsky’s generic representation of rich American women; the label is obviously derivative of the names ‘Astor’ and ‘Vanderbilt,’ two influential families prominent in turn of the century New York of whom the author was well aware (Honest Abe, for example, describes Sonya’s dress as “‘Vanderbilt style’” on page 62). The Astors, being of German descent, and the Vanderbilts, of Dutch ancestry, can both be firmly linked to ‘old immigrant’ antecedents of northwestern European origin, and, as such, can be seen as representative of the dominant American culture Yezierska unflinchingly (yet, in order to call attention to the “invented tradition of Anglo-American nationalism,” Konzett *Modernisms* 23, somewhat erroneously) refers to with her era’s near-ubiquitous appellation of ‘Anglo-Saxon.’ In addition, the conflated moniker calls to mind the affluence, fame and property of the Astors (known for the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City—which Sonya mentions to Hollins by name on page 28—as well as for being the namesake of numerous parks, neighborhoods and, indeed, entire cities across the United States), and conjures images of the immense wealth, power and Fifth Avenue mansions for which the Vanderbilts, descended from railroad and shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt, were known. Consequently, Vrunsky’s

archetypal “Mrs. Astorbilt” is the embodiment of everything to which the immigrant aspires at the beginning of the novel; indeed, Yeziarska’s protagonist feels that such an elevation in status is owed her as if a birthright in the new world, telling Hollins that if he requires money for the dress which he is to make for her he can “‘just add the cost to [his] rich customers’ bills.” After all, she exclaims, “‘there is enough money in America to give [her] the clothes’” she so desires (23).

However, to put the balance of Sonya Vrunsky’s commentary on citizenship into context is not so simple as teasing two family names out of a fictional reference; to do so requires a thorough understanding of early-twentieth century consumerism as well as an intimate familiarity with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century politics. Matthew Jacobson argues that ever since the United States’ “first naturalization law in 1790 . . . limit[ed] naturalized citizenship to ‘free white persons’” (*Whiteness* 7), “the civic story of assimilation (the process by which the Irish, Russian Jews, Poles, and Greeks became Americans)” has been “inseparable from the cultural story of racial alchemy (the process by which Celts, Hebrews, Slavs and Mediterraneans became Caucasians)” (8); thus the naturalization process for ‘marginally white’ new immigrants—including, but not limited to, the “Irish, Russian Jews, Poles, and Greeks” Jacobson lists—was contingent upon successful racial and cultural redefinition. In Chapter Two, a quote from Desmond King defined the three main forms of assimilation present in American political history, as based on the work of sociologist Milton Gordon, as Anglo-Conformity, “under which assimilation is biased toward instilling members of the polity with Anglo-Saxon values and interests,” the melting pot, “in which that group longest present or most dominant in the United States does not determine the overall character of national identity,” and “assimilation as a form of cultural pluralism, under which scheme a multiplicity of

ethnic groups and identities coexist” (85). Subsequently, King observes that despite the nation’s contemporary mania for flying the ostensibly egalitarian flag of the melting pot, “the assimilation process which best describes historically the experience of the United States is the first type, Anglo-Conformity” (85), and the study of this model takes precedence in his work. There is, it often seems when studying the years in which the melting pot metaphor enjoyed its most widespread and favorable usage, a certain amount of overlap between these two models of assimilation, particularly when one reads coeval accounts that describe the end product of the melting pot as a sort of thoroughly whitened, ideologically westernized and urbanely gentrified citizenry, so King’s claim that Anglo-Conformity is, historically, America’s dominant assimilationist framework is valid. Certainly, such an assertion is hard to contest for the decades in question and, when combined with Jacobson’s claims about the inseparable nature of American racial and political development, establishes that the American side of citizenship debates in the early-twentieth century assumed the necessity of converting, and rigorously adhering, to the socio-cultural and construct of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ mythos – and yet (as always, it seems), the issue was fundamentally divisive as immigrants and native-born citizens failed to see eye to eye on the matter.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, the Americanization process, which, at the turn of the century, was grounded in facilitating the switch to Anglo-Saxonism, was often co-opted by schools, charities, employers and government agencies and used to advance their own particular vision of social, cultural or religious conformity;⁴¹ however, Yezierska, despite her character’s initial enthusiasm for such institutions, consummately rejects these conformist-tinged—or, perhaps more

⁴¹ For more on this, see King *Making Americans* 87-115.

accurately, conformist-tainted—processes as unfair, unfeeling and lacking in dignity for the immigrants whom they endeavor to ‘assist.’ Instead of accepting the Anglo-Conformity model, the author, after consistently exposing the flaws in such thinking, chooses to explore alternative means of acculturation, particularly those based on balance, understanding, and ethnic hybridity, in part because of her belief that “difference, whether artistic or cultural, is real, tenacious, and constantly exposed,” and her conviction that the majority of attempts to efface such difference via “the machineries of symbolic social engineering” are self-servingly one-sided and, as such, fundamentally flawed by their own inauthenticity (Okonkwo 131). However, given the period of history in which she was writing, rejecting Anglo-Saxonism, advocating ethnic tolerance and asserting immigrant identity—as Jacobson shows—are detrimental to the quest for participation in meaningful civic discourse as well as to the exercise of civic privileges and duties. Yezierska seems to be aware of this obstacle, and in many of her works she attempts to circumvent the ideological roadblock associated with it by defining alternative paths to citizenship. In *Salome of the Tenements*, she elucidates consumerism as one such alternative – and in doing so she appears to redefine American citizenship as a consumerist, rather than a civic identity.

One of the ways in which Yezierska presents this apparent redefinition to the reader is through her portrayal of Sonya Vrunsky’s quest for acceptance in New York City, one of the United States’ most archetypal metropolises. In attempting to discover—or create—an urban social space wherein she feels a sense of belonging, Vrunsky’s journey centers on market-driven associations rather than political ones; her personal philosophy, as enumerated in her proclamation of a “‘democracy of beauty’” (*Salome* 27) and enacted throughout the novel, hinges on her preference for

material goods over political or legal status. Although the immigrant spends the majority of the novel attempting to define herself as a uniquely American individual, nowhere in the text does she actively engage in traditional expressions of civic participation, or, as Koritz writes, in “the exercise of [the] special obligations and duties” of citizenship (e.g., voting, obeying the law, or participating in civil disobedience) (121). Indeed, by her own admission Vrunsky does not care whether “the democrats or the republicans win” (Yezierska *Salome* 27), which statement makes the reader fully aware of the protagonist’s near-complete detachment from traditional civic practices. Nor is it just the matter of the ruling party that fails to concern Sonya: she is, in fact, indifferent even to the form of government under which she lives, which is a startling revelation coming from a character whose roots can be traced directly to life under a regime so oppressive as to drive her family, and countless other Jews, into permanent exile. Sonya announces that she does not care if there is “Bolshevism” (27), which reminds the reader of the character’s eastern European origin and Russia’s concurrent political unrest (*Salome* was published in 1923 as decades of upheaval in Russia, including the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the Russian Civil War, culminated in the establishment of the Soviet Union), or “Capitalism,” which reminds the reader of her American aspirations, as long as she is able to obtain goods of a certain quality.

This commodity-based democracy makes sense for one in Sonya’s position, and it echoes Marshall Dimock’s observation that citizenship “is more than a legal concept denoting rights and obligations to the political state. Citizenship at its best,” he writes, “is nothing short of a way of life” (21), and, although it is doubtful that he meant it to be a way of life completely bereft of traditional political action (he also states that citizenship is “geared to the commonwealth,” “involves a sense of

responsibility . . . and a dedication to collective need” and must include “loyalty to one’s country,” 21), Sonya’s commodified citizenship, which treats consumerism as a way of life, is the other side of this coin. Jacobson claims that throughout America’s history, “however potent republican logic could prove for egalitarian argumentation, the anti-egalitarian dimension of republicanism was ratified again and again in the political conduct of the [United States]” (*Whiteness* 27), so an alternative means of enfranchisement for new immigrants seems a logical desire. Furthermore, “race has been central to American conceptions of property (who can own property and who can *be* property, for example), and property in its turn is central to republican notions of self-possession and the ‘stake in society’ necessary for democratic participation” (21). Hence Vrunsky’s desire to assert herself consumeristically is inextricably linked to an assertion of whiteness, and both argue her fitness for “democratic participation” (21). The veracity of her claim to property-fuelled citizenship is debated in the text, but “‘the democracy of beauty’” (Yeziarska *Salome* 27), being the protagonist’s primary concern, is so important that Yeziarska uses it as the title of the chapter in which the phrase appears – which, in turn, marks it as a significant plot point and anchors the narrative to the concept of a fundamentally consumerist citizenry. Nan Enstad writes that contemporary fashion “served as a display of class distinction and taste, a cultural marker of privilege and difference. This marker served to express class hierarchies and differentiate middle-class women from working-class women and women of color” (749), but at this point in the novel’s story arc Vrunsky believes that material possessions are America’s great leveler. Sonya uses a name that connotes the highest levels of society rather than the middle class in her comparison, but this illustrates her own limitless ambition and the strength of her belief in the egalitarian nature of commodified social status rather than constituting an

acknowledgement of the deeper race, class and religious divisions that drove such distinctions, and to which Enstad calls attention. In Sonya Vrunsky's mind, if she, the Jewish immigrant, and the emblematic "Mrs. Astorbilt" (Yezierska *Salome* 27) can own the same accoutrements, then they must be equals. Thus, with the inclusion and dismissal of contemporary politics as she invokes the names of America's major political parties and references "Bolshevism" and "Capitalism" (27), Vrunsky's seemingly offhand statement takes on a distinctly political cast in and of itself: she eschews entire political and economic systems in favor of a firm belief in the democratic and egalitarian potential of fashion and an enthusiastic faith in the civic possibilities of her own personal wardrobe.

**"No More . . . 'Greenhorn' Shawl":⁴²
Sartorial Semiosis, Sexuality and Citizenship**

Yezierska's character does not exist in a vacuum. Konzett reports that "what is at stake" in *Salome* "is the proper recognition of citizenship, one not yet attained from within the asymmetrical power relations [of the United States' class system]" (*Modernisms* 41), and this is a crucial point. What Sonya is primarily pursuing in the novel is the abolition of imparity—which calls to mind Thomas Jefferson's view of citizenship as demanding "universality" and the "equality of races and of different stations in life," as well as embodying his belief that "each person has an inborn right to defy tyrants" (Dimock 23)—because "unequal partners, *Salome* suggests, cannot forge a democracy" (Konzett *Modernisms* 41). Although Sonya's willingness to stake equality and citizenship on the acculturational potential of her possessions may strike

⁴² Yezierska *Hungry Hearts* 17

some readers as misguided, her beliefs have obvious roots in contemporary American culture; in short, if the character believes that she can affect citizenship through dress, she is not alone. Indeed, Kenneth Burke notes, in a section of *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) titled, appropriately enough, “The Identifying Nature of Property,” that “in the realm of Rhetoric [*sic*] . . . identification is frequently by property in the most materialistic sense of the term, economic property” (23-24), and Elizabeth Ewen writes that “the daily grind [of immigrant life] was punctuated by the need for money. Money was the secular God of the new metropolis, the calling card that enabled progress to be purchased” (23). This sentiment is echoed in Mary Gordon’s *Temporary Shelter* when one of the Irish-American characters claims that “money [is] God here, and success” (151), and one of the most obvious examples of this era’s ‘purchased progress’ was clothing. At the height of the Americanization movement, clothing contributed to the definition of both a national identity (Peiss 64) “and an ethnic identity” (Okonkwo 131), and the successful manipulation of one’s appearance allowed for the realignment of identity along these lines. Peiss asserts that clothing, for immigrant and working-class women, constituted “a way to display and play with notions of respectability, allure, independence, and status and to assert a distinctive identity and presence” (63), and, when taken with Shreier’s previously noted comments about “the adaptability of dress and its ability to transcend and alter an image” (4), this illuminates contemporary sartorial expression as a sort of semiotic assertion of being, a conscious projection of group affiliation via the employment of specific visual signifiers and the manipulation of economically and politically charged sensory cues. Such a phenomenon is a natural extension of what Eric MacGilvray, in a study of concurrent political thought and its ramifications for modern pragmatic theories of democracy, calls “the centrality of symbols in public life” (555). Indeed,

these “relatively abstract signs and symbols” are what “make a conscious public possible” (Schutz 303), and, “far from being a mere archeological exercise in the quest for origins and national bonding, serious ethnic semiosis claims the right to redefine the boundaries of ethnic interaction and the place of ethnicity in American culture” (Boelhower *Semiosis* 104).

As an example of this process, Vittoria Caratozzolo, in “A Change of Clothes: Italian Women Immigrants from Out-of-Fashion to the Height of Fashion” (2004), displays a photograph of a contemporary new immigrant—a woman named Caterina—and notes that the “bold, provoking overtones of [the] individual portrait,” taken shortly after her husband’s death, “allow us to interpret the photo session as an assertive act” (298). “Only a generation earlier,” writes Caratozzolo, “Caterina, the dress she is wearing, with its revealing sleeves, and her affected pose would have caused a scandal not only in Old World Italy, but in her neighborhood in Mulberry,” a part of New York City’s ‘Little Italy’ (298). In short, her apparel “would have been viewed [by earlier immigrants] as an affront to the honour of the deceased and to the vestmentary restrictions of mourning,” but this allows the woman to identify herself as part of a forward-thinking movement. Caratozzolo claims that Caterina’s “pride in self-display” is indicative of the fact that “she has stepped out of the ancillary role . . . which had previously fashioned women’s lives, identities, and modes of representation severely through [patriarchal] Southern Italian social and cultural norms” (298). The heady combination of modern costume and shifting social conditions (what Caratozzolo calls “a propitious coinciding of female emancipation and the latest fashion trends”), along with a self-assured stance and the use of commercial portraiture, allows Caterina to express her departure from a traditional Italian role in no uncertain terms, and, as Caratozzolo also reports that “posing for an

individual or group photo was a crucial stage in the public representation of . . . immigrants' entry into their newly adopted country" (298), we know that she is not alone in her actions. Although Caratozzolo's article focuses on Italian immigrants and "the cultural experiences of Jewish and Italian women were not identical" (Enstad 749), a parallel can be drawn between the two groups' use of and familiarity with clothing as Enstad demonstrates that their "cultural experiences . . . intersected in the purchase of fashion" (749). We can also assume, based on the work of Schreier and Peiss, that the desired effect of assertions such as Caterina's, whether in the portrait studio or on the street, was the subtextual communication of a specific identity to observers familiar with the form and context of such projections. Thus, as part of this semiotic process, clothing becomes "an identifiable symbol of a changing consciousness" (Schreier 5) for individuals engaging in these displays. Although Peiss suggests that clothing helped define national identity during this era (64), this is not to say that American identity was at the time wholly predicated on garmentry; rather, it acknowledges the fact that "citizenship is less a form of identity than an act of identification" (Boelhower "Sovereignty" 366). If "the melting-pot is illusory" (Okonkwo 133), then the skillful use of garmentry to create further illusion makes perfect sense: the self-definitive process of post-immigration consumption answers the initial American deception of the melting pot with a fiction of its own, the latter being, in many cases, a matter of political, if not physical survival.⁴³

William Boelhower, discussing Eva Hoffman's modern autobiography *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989) in his article "'We the People': Shifting Forms of Sovereignty," notes the author's "repeated underscoring of how important it is to learn the right codes" (367), and this concept is applicable to earlier

⁴³ For a poignant firsthand account of the physical danger encountered by unassimilated or partially assimilated Jews in New York City during this era, see Rose Cohen's description—previously referenced in Chapter One—of nativist aggression on election day in *Out of the Shadow* 101-107.

generations of immigrants as well. The sartorial projection of identity, like any other social or cultural “code,” can be used, once deciphered, to evince one’s familiarity with the dominant group’s milieu and, if desired, to attempt either ingratiation or induction into its ranks. Addressing Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), Boelhower also stresses “the performative nature of citizenship” (“Sovereignty” 366), reiterating his belief that acknowledging this performance is critical to fully understanding the intricacies of “democratic sovereignty” and “democratic representations of the self” (366). “Citizenship,” he writes while examining the ideological and theoretical construction of “we the people,” “confers on the immigrant a new formal identity. This formal identity is our supreme fiction, as those acquainted with chapter 25 of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) know” (365). Far from being a concrete, binding or permanent state, “citizenship is essentially a form of semiosis, with codes that need to be learned, internalized, and repeatedly applied in order for democratic goals to be reached” (366), and it is these codes to which the critic refers in his analysis of Hoffman’s autobiography. Strictly speaking, then, the sartorial performance of civic identity in which many immigrants participated, and which Yeziarska addresses in depth in *Salome of the Tenements*, is not a concept original to the decades during which she was writing: performative display is part and parcel of the very definition of citizenship, and if clothing is a form of semiosis, so too is civic identity in general. Naturalized citizenship, according to Boelhower, is a “formal identity” that is consciously chosen and deliberately enacted and, according to Peiss, Schreier and Ewen, an immigrant’s choice of clothing can be as much a part of this process as the “exercise of special obligations and duties” to which Koritz refers (121). American civic participation requires “the invention of a public, as opposed to a private, self,” and this invention is the “major allotrope of democratic

sovereignty” (Boelhower “Sovereignty” 367). As Hoffman notes in *Lost in Translation*, her “public self” is “the most American thing” about her: “after all,” she writes while living in the United States, “I acquired it here” (251). This creation of an American ‘public self’ is a necessity of which many new immigrants were acutely aware; indeed, Randolph Bourne, in “Trans-National America,” imagines such individuals as having a kind of “dual citizenship” (120) that “is not simply a political ideal . . . [but] a way of being” (Foote 50), and “in his example, culture is analogous to the subject’s interior, and nation to his civic or ‘external’ identity” (51). Simply put, “democracy—with its fostering of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—requires identity-construction” (Boelhower “Sovereignty” 366), and in the early-twentieth century, clothing, with all of its socioeconomic, political, and ethnic connotations, functioned as a deliberate, overt, and relatively easily affected aspect of this construction rich in semiotic significance. Of course, to assume that garmentry is a simple or positive sign of American identity in Yezierska’s work is to underestimate the author’s “ingenious artistry” (Okonkwo 144) and to grossly misinterpret its role in *Salome of the Tenements*.

Indeed, what makes Yezierska’s use of clothing in the novel so interesting—and compelling—is precisely the fact that it is *not* a simple or positive sign of acculturation and American identity. Clothing’s shifting associations, contradictory connotations and disparate uses in *Salome* serve to confuse and complicate the issue, as do the characters’ conflicting attitudes toward garmentry, giving the medium a multiplicity of meanings that do not comport well in a casual reading – all of which echoes William Boelhower’s claim that “in serious ethnic fiction . . . the ethnic sign is not . . . socially fixed or predictable because its very position within the culture of the national map makes it peremptorily unstable” (*Semiosis* 104). The mercurial nature

of dress and its associated ideas can be seen throughout Yeziarska's text, but, significantly, the most politically and socially charged incidents revolve around Sonya Vrunsky and designer Jacques Hollins. Clothing is alternately a "costume" for Sonya (Yeziarska *Salome* 41, 57, 169), hiding her true nature, and an expression of her true artistic self (notably, her *couture* gown shifts effortlessly between the two); it is the symbol of the novel's highest artistry (Hollins' creations "'express and reveal the human soul,'" 29) and a source of disgust embodying the filth and "slovenly neglect" of poverty (9); it is an overt sign of class and social status but, if appropriately artful, is capable of "'transcend[ing] race'" (28). Clothing makes Vrunsky "worth while [*sic*] to Manning" (36), but does not facilitate acceptance in his world. It is a "weapon" used to get what she wants (48), but the weapon backfires as her marriage crumbles. It is a prime attribute of many characters—Manning's clothes are described before his physical features and supersede his personality to establish him in specific cultural and socioeconomic traditions (2), while those of Lipkin, Sonya's editor at the *Ghetto News*, represent his stunted potential and elicit both pity and contempt (9)—and at times it becomes a character in and of itself, such as when Sonya leaves the newspaper's office and Lipkin "watche[s] the threadbare little jacket as it turn[s] the corner and disappear[s]" (10). Ultimately, Sonya's ideas about the democracy of beauty are preposterous and, as Stubbs argues, dress provides both pleasure and frustration for the immigrant ("Material" 157): it is a source of power for Vrunsky, with other characters literally "'groveling before [her] fine clothes'" (Yeziarska *Salome* 54), and a font of disappointment as that power fails to deliver true happiness. Despite her favorite outfit's "conquering beauty" and its effectiveness in "battle" against oppressive landlords and rich philanthropists (48), Hollins' *couture* creation is not the vehicle which successfully carries Sonya Vrunsky to contentment at the end of

the novel – that honor is reserved for a garment of Sonya’s own design. These intra-textual contradictions implicitly deny any simplistic or one-dimensional interpretation of the story in which the immigrant ‘uses clothing to get what she wants.’ Rather, they signal, to the active reader, a need for further constructive interaction on the part of the audience; for, if the story is to make sense to a non-contemporary readership, as Sonya Vrunsky is actively engaging in the process of civic identity-construction via the medium of affective dress the reader must engage in the ideological construction of the semiotics of clothing itself. Only under these circumstances will the story’s meaning—the deconstruction of purely consumerist modes of social assimilation—become clear.

While realizing that the social and sartorial paradoxes Yeziarska embeds in her text fundamentally negate the hypothetical simplicity of civic identity (wherein ‘simplicity’ denotes the one-sided nature of Anglo-Conformity), further fruit is borne by an examination of the paradoxes themselves. One such paradox is the fact that despite Sonya’s rampant belief, early in the text, in the viability of consumerist citizenship—and, in particular, her belief in commodities’ ability to bridge the not inconsequential gap between her poverty-stricken immigrant past and a glittering American future—goods, in the text, are frequently oppressive. *Salome of the Tenements*, as Rachel Bowlby writes of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, “does not present a world in which capitalism in its hypothetical utopian form has been achieved. Behind the attractive images of consumption, it clearly shows . . . some of the peculiar disparities created by that institution in the form it took [from] the 1890s” to the novel’s publication in 1923 (Bowlby 61). When Yeziarska’s protagonist, for example, desperate to see him after a demeaning exchange with a secretary at the settlement home where he pursues his philanthropy, makes her way to John

Manning's personal residence she encounters "a half dozen sleek limousines," "Persian carpets [that line] the sidewalk," a "rich awning," a "pug-nosed butler in broadcloth and livery" (*Salome* 45) and, in another example of Yeziarska's use of clothing as a character, "rich gowns sweeping up the stairs" (46). It soon becomes apparent that the renowned millionaire is hosting a party and "the Persian carpet, the awning, the butler and the limousines [stand] like iron bars between her and Manning" (46). Manning's possessions, even down to his servant's "broadcloth" (45) and "kid gloves" (46), are obstacles in Vrunsky's path; they are sentinels standing watch over the American's world, limiting access to his life and guarding against contact with those who are not on an equal footing with him, economically speaking. This experience occasions a revelation for Sonya – she observes that Manning's wealth is "an armor that she [cannot] pierce to reach the *real man*" (46), which gives rise to ruminations on the nature of affluence as well as to contemplation of the object of her infatuation. "[Is] he," in fact, "a *real man*?" the narrator asks; "[are] rich people ever real?" (46). Despite aspiring to the station of such affluent Americans as she sees on Manning's front steps, Vrunsky somehow recognizes the futility of her quest; she realizes in this scene that goods and property do not make a "*real man*"—that the "hothouse debutantes with their silks and diamonds" are the so-called "soulless rich" who keep "her idol," John Manning, "a prisoner among them" (47)—and yet she continues in her quest for marriage and property despite this revelation, making her a somewhat tragic figure. Indeed, the only thing that saves her from a truly tragic end is her ability, after her divorce from Manning, to see through the façade of wealth, especially where it applies to the class-divisive arena of clothing. Her innate ability to appreciate beauty and design garments such as the wildly successful "Sonya Model" (171)—the popular dress which constitutes her first

major foray into the realm of sartorial creation and establishes her marketability as a designer—attracts Hollins’ attention and “at narrative denouement, Sonya helps steer [him] away from the Fifth Avenue aesthetic” (Okonkwo 141), leading, finally, to a life of contentment for both individuals. Although Hollins will maintain his Fifth Avenue shop, he and Vrunsky will work together to open a store offering fashionable, high-quality clothing to immigrants, and this, it is implied, will be their true passion.

Another, and perhaps more important paradox that Yeziarska presents to the reader is the idea that clothing can simultaneously be both an effective costume, with the power to obfuscate or conceal one’s true identity and turn even the poorest immigrant “‘nobody from nowhere’” (*Salome* 48) into “‘a somebody’” (49), and a deeply fulfilling expression of the true artistic self. The former represents a “carnavalesque inversion” in which Sonya “appropriat[es] a key expression of class privilege for women” (Enstad 750), but in the context of the story it also implies a shallow mien, a deceptive nature and a fundamentally false representation of the self. Vrunsky wears her highly fashionable, exquisitely tailored *couture*, for instance, only when she is intent on fooling another character, and when that character is either male or immigrant—or, in the case of Rosenblat, her landlord, both—she is successful. With a list of demands in mind, Sonya tracks Rosenblat to a crowded restaurant and, with the confidence of a woman in character, boldly deploys her charms with the skill of a thoroughly accomplished thespian. She hesitates at the door, giving him time to appreciate her from afar—at which point he inwardly proclaims her “‘a little queen’” while the narrator describes her as “a vision of loveliness” and an “enchanted creature” (Yeziarska *Salome* 49)—then proceeds to take a seat across from him “with coquettish innocence.” Thereafter, in the space of less than half a page, the woman has “dropped her eyes artfully,” “smiled at the man with a non-committal air of

distinction,” “lifted her lashes” and “laughed playfully,” and her performance is such that “the Essex Street plutocrat felt keenly that a superior being from another world had dropped down from the sky. And he flushed like an awkward schoolboy not sure [*sic*] of his manners” (50). Soon, with the “thick brute” (50) requesting a more private liaison, Vrunsky realizes “the questionable depths to which her guileful flirtation [*is*] leading her” (51), yet she presses on, “determined,” “remorseless” (50) and “desperately wondering if the end justifie[s] her means” (51). With the “rough-neck” (50) suitably enthralled—by this time he is calling Sonya his ““little heart,”” ““little dove”” and ““honey sweetness”” (51) while using every trick in his limited repertoire to ensure another meeting—Sonya agrees to receive him privately, sets the time as ““this evening”” (51), and hurries off.

Sonya’s goal, of course, is to maneuver the “plutocrat” (50) into fixing her tenement in order to make it presentable for another liaison—one with John Manning—and when Rosenblat calls on her in his own building he realizes that he has seen her before. Sonya Vrunsky, ever the industrious manipulator, has visited his office prior to finding him in the restaurant and been summarily dismissed for her trouble; now, having previously been denied the satisfaction of her demands, the immigrant’s charms are on the verge of succeeding when, “in a flash,” the man recognizes her (54). “Fooled by a skirt and a pair of silk stockings,” he mutters (54), calling attention to the woman’s use of garmentry in affecting a disguise that allows her to command the situation as his supposed social and economic superior, and this passage is indicative of just how convincing a costume Sonya’s dress is in the text. The narration makes no mention of different hairstyles, the application of cosmetics, or the use of hats, jewelry or other accessories to alter the woman’s physical appearance; indeed, such changes are expressly and purposefully omitted from Sonya

Vrunsky's description. The only difference in the woman's appearance to which Yeziarska calls attention in this instance is her dress: as "her hour of battle" approaches she dons the "outfit of conquering beauty designed by the divine Hollins" (48)—which language, reiterating the novel's mythopoetic emphasis on fashion as a triumphant, transcendent artistic 'truth,' elevates both *couture* and *couturier* to near-godlike status—and this change is sufficient to fool Rosenblat despite the fact that he has seen the woman in his office only the day before. Nor is such lack of recognition unprecedented in this dress (the first time she wears it to meet Manning, for example, he stares at her "without at first recognizing who she [is]," 33), so the reader isn't surprised at the ease with which Rosenblat is taken in. On the surface, the subsequent restaurant scene turns on the behavior of the landlord himself; Rosenblat is initially obsequious to the supposedly "superior being" (50) that has joined him at the table, but given his shallow, greedy and lascivious nature this gives way to overtly romantic and, more importantly, implicitly sexual overtures as the conversation progresses. Given these events, it would be easy for the audience to assume that the man, in having his lust used against him as Sonya positions herself to extort the desired repairs, gets what he deserves. However, this interpretation of events, in which the reader sees a locally powerful man attempting to take advantage of an attractive young woman who shrinks from him, "horrificed at the implication" (50), is too simplistic to convey the true nature of the scene's proceedings. In many respects, Rosenblat is indeed the stereotype of a greedy, self-important and predatory East Side landlord similar to those found elsewhere in Yeziarska's work. He is described as eating "all the foods of his heart's desire," as "swimming in chicken fat" and as "luxuriating in his gluttony" with a "watering mouth" (49) immediately prior to noticing Sonya in the doorway, and as blustery, pushy and cloying thereafter; he

smokes a cigar, brags about his “‘class’” and “‘good taste’” (50) when he clearly has very little; he reaches for Vrunsky with a “thick hairy paw” and eyes that sparkle “gloatingly” (51) as he gets an invitation to her private room, and he flares with righteous indignation at Sonya’s “‘nerve’” when he believes she is a chorus girl living in his “‘respectable house’” to avoid more expensive accommodation “‘uptown on Broadway’” (52). And yet, although the man is definitely a vulgar caricature of predatory, gluttonous, and ultimately incompetent ‘authority’—in this case, an authority figure taking advantage of poor immigrants by ruthlessly overcharging for cramped, rundown and dirty accommodation—it is Vrunsky who initiates contact with the man and purposefully uses her frank sexual power, via Hollin’s frock, to elicit his advances, and this prevents her from becoming an innocent victim abused or backed into a corner by her superior, lewd and presumptuous though he is. Indeed, while she never has any intention of becoming Rosenblat’s mistress, from the very outset it has been Sonya Vrunsky’s goal to seduce the man and use his lust against him in her crusade to ensnare John Manning. She admits to Lipkin, her editor, that she will use “‘every thought of [her] brain—every feeling in [her] heart—every beauty of [her] body’” to win her millionaire (70), and this tactic applies not only to Manning himself, but to anyone else capable of aiding her in her quest as well. In another of the text’s implicit contradictions, the main character’s selfishness, her voracity for wealth and social status, and her calculated, duplicitous scheming are at odds with the “triumphant sense of spiritual superiority” (28) she feels while wearing Hollins’ creation.

The fact that material possessions enable Sonya to develop multiple personae in the text is demonstrative, on the part of the author, of what Foote calls “a general anxiety about the fragmentation of the self in a capital economy”—though she is

quick to add that “ethnic or immigrant characters suffering from a dislocation of identity that they understand as an *effect* of Americanization are in fact being initiated into a chronic sense of dislocation underwriting American identity at large” in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (34)—and it comports with the idea that split ‘private’ and ‘public’ selves, be they cultural, political, or social, are a necessary component of American urban life. As is the case in the focus of Foote’s “Marvels of Memory” (2000)—Cahan’s “The Imported Bridegroom”—the main character in Yezierska’s novel is “not so much interested in assimilation as in consumption” (46), and, when taken together, the description of Sonya’s change in appearance and the landlord’s subsequent failure to recognize her lead astute readers to two conclusions. The first, and most obvious, is Yezierska’s implication that garmentry, in the right context and used in a deliberate, premeditated manner, can—and does—effectively change one’s identity. Second is the fact that, in Sonya’s case, the power that comes with this change is tied to her sexuality. Although the author undermines the former implication (which seems to agree, at least in part, with notions of Anglo-Conformity) later in the text, the latter is an integral part of Vrunsky’s dealings with men in positions of power, and in this sense Yezierska’s allusion to and channeling of the biblical Salome, who uses her feminine wiles to force King Herod Antipas into executing John the Baptist, is appropriate. For if her landlord is fooled by Jacque Hollins’ creation, it is only because it is draped upon—and flattering—Sonya Vrunsky’s body, and Manning is ironically drawn to the gown’s “‘nun-like’” simplicity (Yezierska *Salome* 26), which he is convinced is due to the woman’s poverty, for much the same reason. While there are women in the novel who are affected by Sonya’s clothing (Rosenblat’s secretary, for one, is “dazzled by the air of uptown that breathe[s] from Sonya’s dress,” 49), the majority of those whom she

meets are not. Neither Vrunsky's coworker, Gittel Stein, for example, nor the ladies in Manning's circle of rich family and friends are fooled by her fashion. This is most likely because the "carnavalesque inversion" of "fashion and adornment" (Enstad 750) present in the text is limited to the feminine and Sonya's fellow women, being familiar with such modes of self-expression, can discern the face behind the metaphorical mask. But it also serves an important thematic function as it emphasizes the relationship between fashion, sex and the power that Sonya Vrunsky wields over men who are supposedly her social, economic or 'racial' superiors. Indeed, Manning and Rosenblat are not the only men who she bends to her will with the frank sexual confidence that Hollins' work bestows: she acquires the money to buy furniture for her newly-decorated tenement by using that same confident sexual energy to sway the Delancey Street pawnbroker Honest Abe, a notoriously miserly character.

Yeziarska has often come under fire for her reliance on "pernicious clichés" that can, and have, been interpreted as largely anti-Semitic (Stubbs Introduction *xix*)—Stubbs, for one, claims that "the charge of racism has remained one of the most compelling critiques of her work" (*xix*)—and her portrayal of sly, greedy and calculating 'Honest' Abe certainly falls into that category. Ron Ebest, however, when analyzing the publication of her short stories in contemporary magazines which also "engaged in . . . heated public discussion over what they collectively called 'The Jewish Question'" (106), contends that although "contemporary and later scholars have criticized Yeziarska's occasional employment of stereotypes," "a reading of those stereotypes in the context of the periodical debate reveals Yeziarska to be a more skillful disputant than one might expect." Ebest argues that the author appropriated controversial stock characters from the dissensus and used them for her own ends, and that in doing so she "re-interpreted [*sic*] them in ways that acquitted . . .

Russian Jews of the responsibility for them” (122). Although there are exceptions, like Rosenblat, which serve as baleful obstacles standing in the way of her piquant heroines’ liberation, such reinterpretation is evident in Yeziarska’s portrayal of new immigrant shopkeepers and businessmen wherein she seeks to “alter the meaning of the image of the greedy Jew” rather than refuting it outright (119). In this vein, Abe the pawnbroker, who succumbs to the “American pollution” of greed (119) only after a botched operation rob him of his “golden,” “transcendent” voice (Yeziarska *Salome* 61, 60) and halts his career as a cantor, serves as a foil to Sonya Vrunsky’s innate power over the men she encounters in the text rather than purposefully encouraging, promoting or endorsing anti-Semitism. True, Yeziarska’s depiction of the man is not a flattering one: he has “no family, no friends,” she writes (59); “his one passion [is] his cash-box. And [for Abe] the world exist[s] only to fill it. People had long ago disowned him, had long ago ceased to approach him for charity. Poverty and want, sickness and woe of those around him [*sic*] were the assets upon which his profits piled” (59). Presented with such a description, it is easy to see why contemporary critics saw this portrayal of an archetypal Jewish East Side pawnbroker, whose antecedents can be traced back to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, as inherently negative—it is indeed a negative description of suitably nasty individual—but to focus on the stereotype and ignore its context is to both shortchange the writer’s skill and misinterpret the character’s role in the story.

Honest Abe serves two functions in the text. In terms of the narrative itself, his purpose is clear: he, along with Jacque Hollins, provides Sonya with the material means to ensnare John Manning and, when the time comes, the revelation of Sonya’s dealings with the man—and Manning’s subsequently apparent anti-Semitism—is the catalyst that finally ruins her struggling marriage. Abe’s second purpose—perhaps

not so obvious, but equally important—is to serve as yet another, albeit extreme, example of Sonya Vrunsky’s charm and sexual persuasion. In her own words, Vrunsky has no doubt that she can elicit “‘blood from a stone—gold from a miser—generosity from a Shylock’” (58), and the veracity of her claim is proven by the end of their first encounter. “‘Men ain’t such hard stuff as they think they are,’” she tells Gittel (57); “‘they melt like wax in my fire for beauty’” (57). “‘I can melt ice into burning fire,’” she proclaims (58); “‘wherever I go,’” she tells Abe himself, “‘my wish is law’” (62). These are, of course, almost comedically hyperbolic statements, but Yezierska combines them with the unforgiving portrait of a greedy pawnbroker to great effect; for despite Abe’s typically cold and miserly persona, when “erect, unconquerable” Sonya sweeps into his shop, “for the first time, he [finds] himself abashed—disconcerted by the dominating presence of a mere girl” (59). In the exchange that follows, the pawnbroker appraises the immigrant’s body and finds it to his satisfaction: “with practiced eye,” relates the narrator, “he scrutinized her as if she herself were an object offered for pawn. One by one he checked off her assets in his mind. She had youth, beauty. She had fine clothes. She had all that and more” (62). Consequently, “even he felt himself staggering before this siren, shaken in his business conservatism like a brainless drunkard” (63), and observant readers will note that it is only after his appraisal of Sonya’s physical assets that Abe agrees to loan her money on the promise of marrying a millionaire. “The all-conquering power that flame[s] within her and radiate[s] from her”—the confidence and sexual power that enraptures Hollins and, emphasized by his *couture*, does the same to Rosenblat and Manning—breaks through “the petrified crust with which the gold-greedy years [have] encased [him]” (62), and the humanity, however brief, reawakened by his desire for the young woman encourages Abe to advance her the sum in question.

Frank Trentmann notes that “consumption can be about managing . . . social relationships, not merely self-centered acquisitiveness” (377), but these two aspects of consumerism come to a head in Sonya Vrunsky’s actions. She successfully employs commodities in her manipulation of others and her ultimate goal—that of economic ascendance—is based on a desire to acquire the material goods she sees as representative of the American middle- and upper-classes. However, it is also important to observe that clothing and sexuality work in tandem when Sonya confronts men of importance in the novel, especially those she perceives as having a direct impact on the future of her life in American society. Enstad claims that contemporary working women’s “social interactions taught them that, in the United States, appearance mattered more than character,” and that their “encounters with bosses, wealthier Americans and men in general shaped their understanding of the ethnic, class, and sexual economies in which they had to find a place, all of which involved clothing” (751). Vrunsky is well aware of these economies and, although clothing is an integral part of her interactions with men in positions of power (either as a means to an end or, in the case of her first meeting with Hollins, an end in itself), it is not what ensures her with victory. Rather, “the supple swing of her lithe body fascinate[s]” the *couturier* (Yeziarska *Salome* 26), Honest Abe scrutinizes her as “an object” and mentally “check[s] off her assets” (62), and although Sonya flares with indignation when her coworker, Gittel, tells her that she should ““pawn [her] Hollins dress and stand before [her] millionaire in only [a] diamond necklace”” (58), this is essentially what she does: Manning’s interest is piqued by her fine garments but he is won when, on a trip to Greenwold, the philanthropist’s country retreat, he is seized by “an overwhelming madness to thrust civilization aside, tear the garments that hid[e] her beauty from him, put out his hands over [*sic*] her naked breasts and crush her to

him until she surrender[s]” (106). Despite the man’s typically reserved and passionless demeanor, this desire is consummated and the two marry shortly thereafter (109). The woman’s body, it seems, is her most useful asset in the context of the story – for while her tailored garments are exquisitely fashioned, they serve only to command authority in the way that they draw attention to the form beneath and elicit thoughts of “carnal indelicacy” from men “possessed” by her allure (144). Supporting this reading of the text, the story’s narration is frequently ripe with sensual, sexual imagery, such as when Vrunsky is dressing to meet her landlord and “the sleek, sumptuous feeling of her finely fitted silk underwear flow[s] into her being like wine” (48). Neither the woman’s “erotic relation to clothing” in this description (Stubbs “Material” 157) nor the “transcendental . . . orgasmic” joy she experiences when designing garments (169) can be ignored, and even after Sonya’s marriage fails and she shuns American high society the exceedingly popular dress that she designs—the sight of which fans the flame of Hollins’ interest and helps him locate her after she leaves her husband (173), resulting, in the end, in a fulfilling relationship based on bridging the gap between immigration and aesthetics—is successful because it is a “supple, clinging thing” which conveys “the luxurious sense of a fitted gown” and emphasizes “the lovely curves of a woman’s body” (Yeziarska *Salome* 169).

This sexualization of Sonya Vrunsky, which is, in part, at her own behest as she uses her powers of seduction to sway the actions and opinions of others, is an important part of Yeziarska’s discussion of alternative citizenship. In many respects, Sonya’s burgeoning awareness of her body, facilitated by changing styles and encouraged by her interactions with clothing, mirrors the larger sartorial awakening taking place in society at the time the book was conceived. Caratozzolo writes that modern methods of industrial clothing production

resonated deeply in women's perception of their bodies. The greater offer of mass-produced ready-made garments in a variety of styles represented for many immigrant women, whose Old World experience consisted mainly of never-changing homemade clothes, the opportunity to feel their bodies, and to look at them and touch them in a different way. In the 1920s, as waistlines dropped, hemlines rose, and dresses became straighter, silhouettes were transformed as radically as the body image. (303)

Yeziarska purposefully complicates this relationship by clothing her heroine in *couture*, rather than ready-made clothing, for those scenes in which sexual tension is most prominent, but this does not diminish the importance of Caratozzolo's link between clothes and the female body. In effect, the author's decision personalizes the story's consumption and makes it specific to Sonya Vrunsky in the same way that her favorite outfit is tailored for her body alone; it also, by the main character's refusal to partake in the mass culture offered to her by American industry and produced by an exploited immigrant workforce, sets up the story's fundamental paradox as it hints at the fallibility of Vrunsky's consumerist-citizen mindset. Sonya, of course, is not abstaining from mass-produced clothing on moral grounds; she does not seem to care that such ready-made garments are manufactured by immigrant labor in unfair or untenable conditions – she merely detests the “loose-fitting garments . . . replicated on a large scale, without regard for individual fit,” that Caratozzolo describes (303) and wants something that expresses her individuality, which, despite her abhorrence of all things mass-produced, supports Caratozzolo's supposition that the offerings of the mass market were part of a larger societal revolution that allowed women to “think of their bodies as plastic, pliable material to fashion and at the same time as communicative self-expressing entities” (303). Kaja Silverman claims that “clothing and other kinds of ornamentation make the human body culturally visible” (145); “clothing,” she writes, referring to Eugenie Lemoine-Luccioni's *La Robe* (1983), “draws the body so that it can be culturally seen, and articulates it as a meaningful

form,” and, regardless of whether or not women’s garments were individually tailored at this time, “the body is strictly connected to dress, but also entangled in the intricate web of consumer culture” (Caratozzolo 303), which statement locates both the contemporary immigrant body and its covering in a larger context of social and cultural change. These changes included, on the one hand, a reclamation of fashion; women previously “forced into high heels, skirts, and corsets” (Posnock 259) and suffering “mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject’s vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work” (Veblen 121), were embracing clothing as a potentially liberating element rather than, as Veblen argues, an oppressive patriarchal imposition. On the other hand, they included the very redefinition of womanhood as female immigrants’—and especially young women’s—“contact with American culture at work, at school, or in the street created new definitions of femininity” (Ewen 208). Yeziarska locates the main character of *Salome* in the middle of this redefinition and her awareness of her clothing, her body, and her sexuality gain prominence as a result.

Ewen reports that “ready-made clothes, makeup, dance halls, movie theaters, [and] amusement parks” were all “part of a cultural environment that assumed greater individual freedom and a less formal relationship with the opposite sex” (208). Vrunsky’s embracement of this attitude, as evidenced by her growing awareness of her own body’s performative potential and her calculated employment of sexual tension, empowers her in the course of the text. Although her actions lead her through some inhospitable and emotionally exhausting situations, they ultimately result in satisfaction as she and Hollins embark together on a life dedicated to making beauty available to all through the proposed establishment of an East Side store which will sell exquisite, yet affordable clothes to working-class immigrants. It is implied

that this venture is unlikely to turn a profit and will be established as both a form of social justice, satisfying the needs of the community, and of sublime artistic expression, satisfying the needs of the couple, and as such the reader assumes that it will maintain its integrity as an innovative and positively transgressive cross-class institution indefinitely. Sonya, expounding on aesthetics, claims that “there is no beauty” in life unless she “can express [her]self” (Yeziarska *Salome* 163), and the text states that “the art of designing” is “the one work in which she [can] find her deepest self-expression” (165). The proposed emporium, therefore, is the embodiment of Vrunsky’s belief that the creation and appreciation of beauty, in the form of clothing, is a decidedly pure, rapturous and liberating endeavor for those with artistic souls, and of her conviction that beauty, in an ideal world, should be available to everyone. But even with the main character’s definitive venture comprising these high-minded ideals the novel’s ultimate stance on the issue is not transparent. The narration reveals that “the released passion of creation” gives the protagonist “the completest [*sic*] emotion she ha[s] ever known” (170), and the character herself insists that the so-called “Sonya Model” (171)—her first successful creation as a clothing designer—comes from her own heart and soul (171), and with this established Vrunsky, in retrospect, assesses her guileful manipulation of others, her calculated machinations, seductions and lies, and her disastrous marriage into the American upper-class as merely “seeking for the feel of the beautiful” (170). This conclusion, which endeavors to explain Sonya’s underhanded and, at times, plainly dishonest dealings with others as so many unsuccessful attempts to enter into the world of American consumerism—of which the text’s ubiquitous ‘beauty’ is representative—is one of which the reader, by design, is quite suspicious. It is an uneasy connection and does not fully excuse the woman’s selfish behavior, nor does it provide an

emotionally or an intellectually satisfying dénouement. To exonerate Sonya Vrunsky on the strength of her desire for commodities alone is to validate her often contemptible actions and give tacit approval to—indeed, essentially become an accomplice to—the woman’s duplicitous means. Furthermore, it would render Yezierska’s exploration of consumerism one-dimensional as it reifies Vrunsky’s struggle for citizenship as purely economic and allows for an interpretation of the novel in which that struggle is the most effective, if not the sole route to establishing civic identity. The novel, to borrow a phrase from Konzett, “asks the reader to scrutinize not only Manning’s philanthropy but also the heroine’s own dubious morality” (*Modernisms* 44), and if this is not done its essential meaning is lost. In the words of Nan Enstad, the experiences of working women in the American labor market during this era “made it clear that appearance, rather than contribution to the nation’s wealth as a worker, or participation in U.S. culture, was at the heart of Americanization” (752), and if the text’s conclusion precluded the condemnation of Vrunsky’s deplorable conduct on the grounds that her actions were made in the name of acculturation it would validate this stance and the contemporary reviews of Yezierska’s work comprising “praise from pro-assimilationists and disdain from ethnic Jews” (Konzett *Modernisms* 20) would stand.

Jacque Hollins, the only character in *Salome of the Tenements* to successfully navigate both the East Side and Fifth Avenue, albeit in two different personae, claims at the end of the novel that beauty ““belongs to no one class”” (Yezierska *Salome* 178), and this statement would seem to condone Sonya’s rapacious actions. In the sense that no class, in the world of the novel, is entitled to a monopoly on beauty, the reader can interpret Vrunsky’s transgressive actions—made in the pursuit of that beauty—as justified. However, regardless of whether or not the audience views them as positive,

these socioeconomic transgressions do not ultimately paint a clear picture of the nature of consumerist ‘beauty,’ sartorial or otherwise, as it relates to either Sonya Vrunsky’s concrete (legal) or theoretical (cultural) citizenship. Christopher Okonkwo claims that the Sonya Model dress—Vrunsky’s own “heart’s blood” (Yeziarska *Salome* 170) and a combination of functionality and luxurious indulgence (169)—is “quietly subversive in that it tactfully crosses elitist, gender, and socioeconomic barriers” (Okonkwo 140). “Although it appears,” he writes, “like other dresses of the period, to aid Americanization in that its affordability enables the ordinary immigrant woman to assume a ‘real American’ and middle-class status, the Model actually subverts the [Americanization] Movement’s hypocrisy” (141) by being the product of an immigrant mind and overcoming the “limited prospects and the absence of materials supportive of life and creativity” which an immigrant, according to the movement’s philosophy, was “expected to accept” (142). This, to a degree, is true. However, equally true is Stubbs’ assertion that the Vrunsky-Hollins Grand Street store, which “appears radical” in its attempt to “eliminate the class differential upon which the distinction between couture and ready-made was historically based” (“Material” 168), is in fact less radical than its potential suggests. For although “the ‘Sonya model’ gown itself can be read as an effort to reconcile the individuality of the couture garment with the universal applicability of the ready-made,” “the mass-produced Sonya model is a couture garment only for Sonya, in the sense that she custom-makes it for herself, for her own body” (168). As such, “other women will be wearing a ready-made gown when they wear the Sonya model” (169), and the “attractiveness” of these mass-market copies “will itself be in question” because they “will not meet Sonya’s primary criterion for beauty, a correspondence with the unique body and personality of the consumer” (168). Essentially, Vrunsky’s idea of beauty,

when it applies to her own clothing, involves custom-tailored garments that flatter her figure and reflect her personality—an ideal that further emphasizes the link between the protagonist’s personality and her sexuality, and which, as we have seen, she readily employs in the manipulation of others—but when applied to women other than herself it does not require such individuality and, therefore, does not engender such heightened transgressive potential. Hence, although “it might be argued that the Grand Street store is transgressive of class,” “in fact, [these] ready-made copies of [Sonya’s] couture would serve to advertise the original couture garment, which would rise in value as a result” (169). Indeed, Stubbs contends that

as long as the technology of the clothing industry prevented reproduction from being exact—as long as the ready-made failed to present a faultless simulacrum of couture and the difference, however infinitesimal, was recognizable as a sartorial distinction—the couture garment retained its aura, and the class differential remained. (169)

Hence—in a manner similar to that of *Arrogant Beggar*, in which the protagonist’s final actions negate her supposed moral high ground and align her with those whom she has spent the entire narrative struggling against, thereby undermining the novel’s trenchant critique of institutional charity and creating an ambiguity central to the audience’s interpretation of the text—Sonya will become a sexual, sartorial, and socioeconomic hypocrite with the establishment of the Grand Street store, and this complicates the issue such that even the character’s beloved “‘democracy of beauty’” (Yeziarska *Salome* 27) cannot create equality in the context of her proposed endeavor.

Yeziarska foreshadows the Grand Street store’s climactic contradiction in her text as early as the third chapter (17-20), wherein Hollins’ history as a sweatshop worker who travels to Paris, learns the art of designing, and moves back to New York City to establish himself under a French pseudonym is revealed to the reader.

Caratozzolo reports that “American urban retailers sent fashion promoters overseas to copy the models of Paris couturiers” (298), but these retailers “were not interested in conspicuous ‘elite’ consumption” – they reproduced the latest styles to sell to the masses at one-third of their original price (298). “The upper-class French trade, in other words, became an American mass market” (Leach 95), and Hollins’ journey—epitomized by his co-opting of *couture* and, with Sonya Vrunsky, his establishment of a store selling mass produced, pseudo-Parisian garments to the American immigrant public—deliberately mirrors this process in order to emphasize the hypocrisy of the novel’s conclusion. Vrunsky’s democracy of beauty is based on flawed principles: it wants widespread and equal access to sartorial goods, but it scorns the mass-produced nature of products that make such access possible. Likewise, Sonya despises copies of *couture* garments but her supposedly visionary and egalitarian solution to the aristocracy of beauty—the Grand Street store—will trade in nothing but. Enstad’s examination of fashion, political subjectivity, and garment industry labor strikes in “Fashioning Political Identities: Cultural Studies and the Historical Construction of Political Subjects” (1998), listing similar cracks in the era’s consumerist ideology, concludes that

women’s ability to acquire ready-made clothes in the latest styles should not be heralded as the “democratization” of fashion due to industrialization. This oft-repeated thesis neglects the fact that the clothing available to working women, while stylish, was of decidedly inferior quality. Working women complained of cheap shirtwaists, suits, and shoes that came apart almost immediately. The possibilities offered to working women by consumer capitalism were matched by painful limitations. Furthermore, the availability of fashionable styles did not obliterate, but merely shifted, the role of clothing in class distinction. (754)

This passage echoes Sonya’s complaints about ready-made clothing in *Salome of the Tenements* and reinforces the impossibility of her proposed solution to the problem of socio-sartorial elitism. It also resonates with Stubbs’ claim, made the same year as

Enstad's, that, generally speaking, "the couture garment retained its aura, and the class differential remained" despite its reproduction in mass quantities ("Material" 169).

Although *Salome of the Tenements* addresses aspects of American consumerism other than clothing, the author's decision to make clothing the main character's chosen avenue of democratic egalitarianism is essential in establishing the hypocrisy of the novel's final moments as "the basic irony of fashion is that it cannot succeed in marking the individual as truly different. While fashion may be touted as a means to create difference, its pursuit is more effectively a means of social homogenization" (Caratozzolo 304). Sonya's pursuit of fashion, which attempts to mark her out as different from other immigrants, is misguided in that fashion's "success lies . . . in its ability to provide a sense of individuality within a shared code of appearance, since individuals can look acceptably different only within a restricted aesthetics" (304), which sums up the paradox at the heart of Vrunsky's journey—and, therefore, at the heart of the novel itself—which the store is meant to embody. That Sonya's foray into the world of fashion, made under the auspices of bringing beauty, individuality and equality to her East Side compatriots, will result in clothing no more original than any other mass-market copies of *couture* and will therefore reinforce class divisions rather than erasing them is a given. Her store will effectively be yet another avenue of the social control represented, in contemporary culture, by the *couturier* and his art (Stubbs "Material" 162, 169), and which Sonya herself has spent the majority of the novel attempting to circumvent. Hence the freedom and sexual power that the protagonist has embraced with Hollins' dress, and which has allowed her, in a circuitous manner, to establish her identity as a designer, will not be passed on to others or redistributed on Grand Street and there is no transcendent finale.

Vrunsky alone ascends, only to be disillusioned and fall again, and the aristocracy of beauty remains intact.

In a more technical sense, the sexualization of *Salome*'s main character also aids in the creation of a viable alternative civic self through the unequivocal assertion of gender identity. Enstad reports that "working women widely understood and resented that many people saw them as 'unrefined,' and therefore less feminine and/or womanly, because of their labor and their income" (752), and her comments imbue their milieu with a somewhat androgynous, if not asexual character. Likewise, Magdalena Zaborowska, in writing about Mary Antin, claims that the latter "may be seen as a mere phantom who 'soars above' . . . the slum because her sexuality cannot fully emerge in the repressed America" (74), and this statement is true of many of Antin's contemporaries as well. The implications of Zaborowska's assessment can also be extended to the realm of fiction and applied to most, if not all, of Yeziarska's female characters. Certainly it can be applied to Sonya Vrunsky and her marriage—which the author describes as "a burnt-out star" characterized by "blotted out . . . passion" and "the winter coldness of a sterile race" (Yeziarska *Salome* 146)—to the "New England puritan" John Manning (147). Commenting on Zaborowska's evaluation of Antin's "phantom . . . sexuality" (Zaborowska 74), Boelhower notes, while expounding upon the effacement of identity that accompanies democratic sovereignty when an individual becomes a part of 'we the people,' that "being ground in the crucible of *reductio ad unum* means that Antin must also be unsexed. As Zaborowska implies, the price of citizenship is also paid out in the coin of gender abstraction" ("Sovereignty" 368-369). "This pathos," he claims, "inherent in the democratic episteme, only apparently applies to both men and women" because "the universal subject of the American constitution was—and essentially still is—male"

(369). Thus, according to Boelhower's evaluation, attempting to establish an individual, gendered identity opposes the technicalities of traditional American citizenship and becomes an inherently countercultural endeavor.

Yeziarska addresses this issue by creating a protagonist who knowingly embraces an alternative mode of being in an attempt to open the doors of American identity to persons who do not conform to the sexless anonymity of citizenship: Sonya Vrunsky establishes a gendered identity by asserting herself sexually, and, as we have seen, this assertion is facilitated by her use of commodities in true consumerist fashion. When she meets her landlord, she does so in a restaurant, itself indicative of the twentieth century's new American consumption, as she thinks it will aid her in her charade (49); when she beguiles Rosenblat and Honest Abe she wears newly acquired clothing to make herself more desirable (48-49, 59-60); when she is expecting a visit from Manning she buys new furnishings for her room and displays them in a manner which communicates a premeditated aesthetic of cleanliness and order to her caller (65); when she establishes herself as a clothing designer, it is with a model of dress designed for mass production, albeit one that is decidedly more fashionable—in the American sense of having clean, understated lines and minimal trimming—than those concurrently produced for sale in the Lower East Side market (169-170). As such, the protagonist's energetic, if occasionally overzealous assertion of gender identity through sexuality (see, for example, *Salome* 51, whereupon she questions "the . . . depths to which her guileful flirtation[s] [are] leading her") and her use of commodities are inextricably linked. Vrunsky's acquisition of goods is predicated on her desire—indeed, Yeziarska implies, her intense *need*—to express her individuality, as she believes that the former is a necessary step in accomplishing the latter. In addition, marrying John Manning will, in the immigrant's mind, at least, facilitate

entry into American society by simultaneously bestowing upon her the stamp of Anglo-Saxon approval and a significant increase in purchasing power, allowing her to surround herself with the luxurious and beautiful possessions she associates with his social class.

Sonya herself addresses the intersection of these concepts—commerce, beauty, individuality, and the millionaire marriage—on a number of occasions. When Jacque Hollins questions her about the motivation behind her passion for beautiful raiment, she responds by asking “‘what makes any woman want clothes more than life? . . . Poets when they’re in love they can write [*sic*] poems to win their beloved. But a dumb thing like me—I got no language—only the aching drive to make myself beautiful” (30). Sonya’s response to the designer’s query, and to other characters’ elsewhere in the novel, illuminates the links between her property, her beauty and individuality, and her ability to attract a rich man’s attention: “‘I got to have *real art*—delicate colors—soft hangings,” she tells Gittel Stein, “‘to set off me—myself” (57). “‘I got to make beauty shine from an Essex Street tenement. For Manning I got to be a lily blooming out of an ash-can” (57). She tells Hollins, during their first meeting at his studio, that she is “‘starving” for beauty and that

the hunger for bread is not half as maddening as the hunger for beautiful clothes. Why, day after day, for years and years, I used to go from store to store, looking for a hat, a dress that will express me—myself. But something that is me—myself, is not to be found in the whole East Side. Sometimes I’m so infuriated by the ugliness that I have to wear that I want to walk the streets naked—let my hair fly in the air—out of sheer protest. My soul is in rebellion. I refuse to put clothes over my body that strangle me by their ready-madeness [*sic*]. (23)

Vrunsky claims that she refuses to cover her body with ready-made garments, and, as evidenced by her actions in the text, she is willing to use that very body to gain access to *couture*. She declares, rather melodramatically, that she is “‘sick—dying from the

blood poison of ugliness” (23), and readers can interpret her intense desire for beauty as emblematic of her drive for self-expression, including the expression of the femininity that she feels ready-made clothing “‘strangle[s]” and suppresses (23). The “kinship” Sonya feels with Hollins is due to the “divine understanding of” and “‘great, consuming passion for beauty”” that they share (22), and this shared passion forms the basis, after her divorce from Manning, for a lasting, mutually fulfilling relationship. The fact that Hollins is seduced by Sonya’s energy and passion before she cloaks herself in the sartorial disguise that allows her to seduce other men—and the fact that the two, upon meeting, understand each other as artistic equals with only a look and a brief conversation (22)—both presages and lends credibility to their partnership in the final stages of the novel, and it is this relationship, along with the catastrophic failure of Sonya Vrunsky’s marriage, that Yeziarska uses to undermine the woman’s ambition to attain affluent, consumerist citizenship. However, before this union occurs and is used to erode the ideological foundations of Sonya’s economic Americanism, the author gives her an ardent intensity that, at times, contradicts itself and exposes cracks in her consumerist ideology.

Prior to decorating her room for Manning’s visit, Sonya decries the poor quality of furnishings bought on an installment plan, claiming that they are only “‘fit for waps and kikes”” in their “‘ready-made shoddiness”” (57). “‘They got only red plush over wood shavings, faked mahogany varnished with glue,”” she rages (57), and these statements reveal much about the novel’s consumerist civics. First of all, such statements betray the character’s association of cheap, poorly made goods with decidedly unassimilated immigrants of various non-‘Anglo-Saxon’ ethnicities, as evidenced by her use of the early-twentieth century epithets “‘waps and kikes.”” This association, when stripped of Vrunsky’s derogatory language, is both logical and

historically accurate: Ewen describes “the installment plan” as “a practical solution for immigrants too poor to pay cash on the line but willing to take on long-term debts to satisfy their needs” (170), and she cites the story of the Ganz family, who spent eighteen years paying off a sewing machine at twenty-five cents a week (170), as a contemporary illustration of the process. However, despite being “a practical solution” to one of the hardships of ghetto life, Sonya’s association of the plan with poverty-stricken “waps and kikes” reveals a desire to distance herself from these immigrants, as well as her intention of doing so via economic—and, more specifically, overtly consumerist—means. Secondly, these statements reveal the woman’s hypocrisy and the inescapable truth that her history is rooted, and her personality thoroughly entrenched, in such immigrant culture; Gittel, to whom she has made the remark, responds by calling her a “big bluff” and reiterates that Sonya, for all her disdain of such furniture, was “born on an installment bed” (57). Finally, these statements allow the reader to make comparisons between Vrunsky’s position later in the novel and the “installment furniture” she so loathes (57): her own attempts, via the sartorial assertion of identity, to imitate native-born and upper-class Americans amount to little more than the application of a glossy, deceptive topcoat over a more common—and, in the eyes of Anglo-Conformists, decidedly vulgar—base, conveying the author’s ultimate belief that purely consumerist modes of acculturation are doomed, by virtue of their own inherent inauthenticity (Okonkwo 131), to fail in spectacular fashion as does the Vrunsky-Manning marriage.

This stance notably complicates the novel’s treatment of the issue of consumerism as it reveals a fundamental authorial suspicion of the devoutly consumerist doctrine espoused by Vrunsky throughout the majority of the text – a suspicion which, when applied to the story alongside Boelhower’s observations about

the identity-reductive nature of joining the democratically sovereign ‘we the people,’ means that, in the world of the novel, the protagonist’s attempts to use commodities to define herself as an American individual are ill-fated from the outset. Sonya’s desire for beautiful goods, especially clothing and furniture, is due to her conviction that such possessions will “‘express and reveal’” her numinous artistic “‘soul’” (Yeziarska *Salome* 29), thereby liberating her from a life of immigrant poverty by communicating, on a fundamental and semiotic level, her individuality—and, therefore, her distance from other, less refined immigrants—and her fitness for acceptance into “uptown” American society (42). Such assertions, however, in light of Boelhower’s definition of citizenship and Livingston’s claim that, from the point of view of both “social-labor history” and “cultural critique,” “the rise of corporate capitalism represents a political problem because it commodifies personality or selfhood” (159), are unequivocally antithetical to the process of naturalization. Like Cahan’s David Levinsky before her, Sonya Vrunsky uses all of her wiles to achieve economic ascendance, but, though Yeziarska appears at the beginning of the novel to enumerate an alternative citizenship based solely on consumerist principles, her success does not equate to full social or civic inclusion by the Anglo-Conformist mainstream. This is because, according to Boelhower, Americans “are all free and equal as citizens, not as corporeal, gendered individuals with . . . peculiar desires, talents and constructive habits. To enjoy . . . democratic rights [they] must literally be reduced to one” (“Sovereignty” 365) – that is, to function as part of the national democracy they must lose their individual identity and join the larger “‘we’” comprising “‘we the people’” (365). For immigrants, “material success is often proof of one kind of acceptance in default of another, higher kind” (Dwyer 107), and neither Levinsky nor Vrunsky are able to fully shed their Jewish immigrant past and join the

amorphous, yet elitist, abstracted American “we.” This is not, as both texts make clear, for lack of trying (although Levinsky seems to do better than Vrunsky in this regard), and the characters’ fundamental, unshakeable ‘otherness’ precludes their admittance into the politically-motivated construct of a homogenous national polity, as do their “peculiar desires, talents and . . . habits.” Furthermore, as has been previously addressed, “the price of [U.S.] citizenship is also paid out in the coin of gender abstraction” because “the universal subject of the American constitution . . . is . . . male” (Boelhower “Sovereignty” 369), and these two epistemological peculiarities—that typological conformity and sexlessness are essential to the individual attainment of naturalized citizenship in the United States—run counter to Sonya Vrunsky’s attempts to remake herself as an American by asserting, via consumerism, both her individuality and her sexuality. Indeed, Vrunsky’s assertions paradoxically ensure her rejection by and exclusion from “we the people,” and, although she may not have worded it with Boelhower’s eloquence, Yezierska certainly understood this situation and crafted *Salome of the Tenements* to reflect its intricacies.

Ultimately, the complexity of these shifting forms of sovereignty, as Boelhower refers to them, can be tied to more than just the world of the novel. Indeed, many of the carefully constructed paradoxes enumerated in Yezierska’s exploration of clothing as both identity-builder and civic signifier are expressly derived from those inherent in the real-world processes of U.S. naturalization and economic integration undergone by many immigrants. Boelhower’s evaluation of citizenship, addressed in the previous paragraph, claims that in the quest to become part of “we the people,” “native-born citizens,” not just immigrants, “must actively pursue their rights in order to achieve political sovereignty” as such sovereignty “can only be had through

parliamentary representation, which requires rites of consent” (“Sovereignty” 365). Hence “there is—it goes without saying—a process of abstraction involved in this civic commitment, as equal rights and negative liberties require a *reductio ad unum*” (365). From this perspective, civic identity is itself a paradox: in order to accept “a new formal identity” as citizen (365), one must abandon the individuality of identity itself. For many modern readers, the civic redefinition in Mary Antin’s autobiography, which paints a rosier picture of assimilation than either Rose Cohen’s or Anzia Yezierska’s, is not, therefore, a positive experience because Antin seems to have supplanted her immigrant identity with a carefully constructed American persona rather than mediating between the two and preserving her identity as an ethnic individual. Indeed, she even goes so far as to claim that her previous ethnic self is “dead, for [she is] absolutely other than the person whose story [she has] to tell” (Antin 1), and when encountered by a modern audience—one accustomed to the current modes of self-consciously asserted ethnicity enabled by what Boelhower calls “the insaturation of the multicultural paradigm in the 1970s” (374)—“Antin’s citizen mask seems too much like a negative identity, one based solely on subtraction” (368), despite the author’s claim that her previous, ethnic self is the heroine of her tale (Antin 1). The observation that citizenship reduces individuality is not, of course, unprecedented – Walter Lippmann, for example, observed in 1922 that “the art of inducing all sorts of people who think differently to vote alike is practiced in every [American] political campaign” (*Public Opinion* 107). Boelhower sums it up rather poetically when he writes that “based on radical individualism, our democracy remains paradoxically a community of people without community” (“Sovereignty” 368), and this enigmatic concept surfaces often in Yezierska’s treatment of consumerist principles. Her short story “The Fat of the Land” serves as an excellent

illustration of this point: its main character, Hanneh Breineh, becomes fundamentally alienated from rich and poor alike as her Americanized children achieve economic ascendance and surround her with all of the comforts and conveniences that money can buy. In the course of the narrative, Hanneh discovers that her newfound economic citizenship separates her from her uptown neighbors as much as it distances her from those she knew downtown. Similarly, Sonya Vrunsky cannot use commodities to mask who she truly is, nor can she return to her former life after she transgresses certain prescribed boundaries by attempting cultural and economic integration with the Anglo-centric mainstream. After marrying Manning she becomes, according to a guest at their wedding reception, “astonishingly well-dressed,” but “her gesticulating hands show her origin” (Yeziarska *Salome* 121), and Lipkin, her erstwhile boss and romantic admirer, is “unable to hide his shock of revulsion at the change in her” when she returns to the ghetto (159). Lipkin tells Sonya that she has “‘killed [her]self with the [Jewish] people’” by entering into a “‘Christian marriage’” (159), which, as we have seen, was primarily pursued by the woman for economic reasons – and, other than her connection with Jacque Hollins, a Jew who has also transgressed, via Parisian fashion, America’s socioeconomic boundaries, he seems to be right. Sonya, prior to her reintroduction to the love-struck designer, with whom she finds some measure of resolution, is a woman without a place: “she ha[s] left Manning and the ghetto ha[s] shut her out” (165).

With these circumstances in mind, Sonya’s thwarted attempts to attain commodified ‘citizenship’ in the Anglo-economic mainstream seem to mirror Boelhower’s principle of the paradoxically reductive nature of citizenship itself. Vrunsky is able to gain access to the highest levels of society with her finery but is not allowed full inclusion in its ranks; she endeavors to assert identity and affect

citizenship through consumerism but is unsuccessful because the identity she desires—that of an ‘American’—is predicated on the theoretical loss of individuality in a civic context. She transgresses her immigrant role by using commodities—including fashionable dress—to assert her independence, giving her a marked individuality when compared to other immigrants, the evidence of which can be seen when she uses Hollins’ *couture* gown to lure Manning into a meeting at her tenement house and employs “‘plaster,’” “‘paint,’” and “‘a new hard-wood [*sic*] floor” and furniture (55) to create a “‘stage setting” (57) that will mask its “depressing squalor” (41) and “make the place presentable for him” (39), and it negates her desired role by asserting gender and sexuality in what should, according to Boelhower, be an “unsexed” “gender abstraction” (“Sovereignty” 369). In point of fact, Sonya’s very uniqueness is what prevents her from becoming a citizen in Manning’s America: the immigrant, with her ostentatious and energetically asserted consumerist and sexual identity, is emphatically rejected by her husband’s rich peers because she retains, to a degree, her fundamental individuality, and thus Yezierska uses the paradigm of material commodities to both promise and sabotage the conferment of American citizenship. The author simultaneously implies that consumerism is an expression of identity—and, hence, a means of asserting civic viability—and undermines that same assertion by showing Manning to be duped in the short term and, later, angry when the duplicity is revealed. In this scenario, John Manning, millionaire, represents America and Americanism, and Sonya Vrunsky, liar, represents the ineffectual artifice of immigrant consumerist expression. While Sonya is initially able to deceive Manning-America, she must continue her charade indefinitely or risk permanent rejection – and, as the breakdown of the Vrunsky-Manning marriage demonstrates, this, in the writer’s opinion, is nigh impossible. In the same way that Boelhower’s

citizenship is a perpetual process of identity-construction wherein one “must actively pursue their rights in order to achieve political sovereignty” (365), Yeziarska’s assessment of civic acculturation concludes that it is a perpetual transmission of false signals, even if one is deluded enough to be thoroughly convinced by his or her own forgery of an ‘American’ persona. The author’s fiction typically “depicts characters buffeted between autonomy and belonging” (Koritz 134), and this, in *Salome*, is facilitated by the main character’s creation of a false socioeconomic identity. “The public sphere [Sonya] wishe[s] to join, the sphere inhabited by John Manning,” writes Koritz, “[is] accessible, if at all, only by the subterfuge enabled by consumer goods” – and therein lies the problem. “It [is] not, after all, a public sphere but a lifestyle community” (134).

***Public Opinion* and Its Problems: The Democratic Debate in Context**

Yeziarska’s engagement with the theme of consumerist civics, characterized by *Salome of the Tenements*’ exploration of social and economic acculturation via the attempted redefinition of citizenship, is rooted in fact as it addresses the collapse of traditional definitions of civic engagement, the confusing nature of civic and social inclusion, and the ineffectuality of certain alternative paths to cultural viability in contemporary American society. During the early years of the twentieth century the changing nature of American citizenship was discussed in terms of race,⁴⁴ the

⁴⁴ Significantly, Roediger notes that contemporary discussions of race were themselves frequently muddled and misleading as the eugenically-informed debates over ‘racial traits’ taking place in government and public media regularly conflated race, ethnicity, culture and religion. For more on this confusion, see *Working Toward Whiteness* 21-25.

‘desirability’ and assimilability of certain groups of immigrants⁴⁵ and the process of assimilation itself (Anglo-Conformity versus “variations of melting-pot ideology, cultural pluralism, and cosmopolitan nationalism”; Konzett *Modernisms* 24). There were frequent arguments about certain groups’ “‘fitness for self government’” in a democratic republic (Jacobson *Whiteness* 42-43) and over proposed methods of political and patriotic indoctrination,⁴⁶ all of which contributed to perpetually shifting, occasionally contradictory, and frequently mystifying grounds for socio-civic inclusion after the turn of the century. In the 1920s, as these debates fragmented the American population into ever-splintering ‘racial’ and political subgroups, the popular debate over citizenship and civic responsibility was undertaken in public media by men with whose work Yezierska was undoubtedly acquainted, and whose ideas had a definite impact on the formation and presentation of her own. I have thus far refrained—or, at the very least, attempted to refrain—from belaboring the Yezierska-Dewey connection for several reasons, the first and most obvious of which is that the particulars of their relationship have been written about, analyzed, and commented upon by numerous historians and literary critics and hardly need repeating. Secondly, as so much has already been written about their interactions with one another (both intellectual and romantic) and scholars concerned with Yezierska’s work will doubtless be well acquainted with, or at least acutely aware of, their liaison, any diversion to discuss it in detail is likely to be more of a distraction than an asset given the scope of this research. Finally—and most importantly—I prefer to interact with

⁴⁵ As with race, King reports that debates over ‘assimilability’ were habitually confused by tenuous pseudoscientific links between ethnicity and work ethic, poverty, mental health and innate criminality. Such links were, of course, frequently biased or politically-motivated. For additional information on this subject, see *Making Americans* 70-73.

⁴⁶ While it would be impossible to compile an exhaustive list of such methods and the contemporary programs they inspired, King presents a fairly succinct compendium which, for the purpose of this research, serves as both explanatory and representative. For more on the subject of political and patriotic indoctrination prior to the passage of 1924’s Johnson-Reed Act, see “The Origins of Americanization” in *Making Americans* 87-115.

Yezierska's work in its own right, and thereby judge it on its own merit, rather than defining it (and, consequently, her) in relation to John Dewey, as so many others have done. However, regardless of their relationship, any discussion of contemporary citizenship, civic interaction, and democratic ideals would be incomplete without Dewey as his work "has [probably] done the most to shape [modern] dialogues on education and democracy" (Westheimer & Kahne 238). His critical conversation with Walter Lippmann, in particular, which Eric MacGilvray calls a "great set piece in American political thought" (545), frames much of the era's philosophical discourse on the subjects and sheds additional light on the theoretical depth contained in Yezierska's texts.

In 1925—the year that *Bread Givers*, Yezierska's most well-known novel, was published—Lippmann, a political commentator and contemporary of Yezierska's erstwhile mentor and love-interest John Dewey, published a book entitled *The Phantom Public*. This had been preceded by the equally influential *Public Opinion* (1922), and the journalist's two meditations on the changing nature of citizenship in the United States resulted in a public dialogue between Lippmann and Dewey as they reviewed and responded to each others' work in the fields of social and political theory. "Neither saw in American politics a particularly thriving democratic process" (Whipple 158-159), and they agreed that this was because informed democratic participation was becoming increasingly difficult for the average citizen as the country grew and public policy, as a result, became more comprehensive and involved. They also concurred that no single individual could be expected to have an opinion on every political decision (Koritz 115; 117), but they differed in their approaches to the problem and in the positing of potential solutions. Lippmann—who writes that "the character in which men deal with their affairs is not fixed" (*Public Opinion* 94) and

argues that “there is no one self always at work” (95)—acknowledged the need for “at least two distinct selves” in a civic context, one “public” and political, the other “private and human” (3), illustrating that Hoffman’s and Boelhower’s assertions on the subject are not without precedent. This, in the journalist’s opinion, is equally true of both voters and elected officials and is perhaps even more apposite, if not essential, for the latter. Indeed, in 1922 one of Lippmann’s articles appeared in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* under the title “Democracy, Foreign Policy and the Split Personality of the Modern Statesman,” in which he writes that politicians must continually act on the public’s behalf—that is, based on what his or her constituents desire—and in the best interest of the country based on privileged or specialized information “which [only] the insiders possess . . . because the sources of information are in their hands” (193). Often, according to Lippmann’s logic, these two modes of action are irreconcilable in matters such as foreign policy and “it is utterly impossible to rely on the mysterious wisdom of the people.” “Any statesman who pretends that he does rely on it, or can,” the pundit contends, “is trifling with questions of life and death” (193); however, while listening to voters’ mutually exclusive demands to simultaneously raise a “prohibitive tariff against goods” and “open the door . . . to expand . . . foreign trade,” for example, those same statesmen, “bowing to what they call the public will, are quite capable of pretending that such a program of contradictions is feasible” (192). Of course, in such circumstance those in charge of legislating change would be morally obligated to act contrary to the “public will” if such a will it is not in the nation’s best interest, and they must act on their own best judgment in a timely manner as asking “the executive in any democratic country to try to keep his knowledge a secret, and then wait to act until public opinion approximates what he secretly believes, is absurd in theory and unworkable in

practice” (193). To do so, Lippmann boldly states, is to force “our [democratic] leaders to abdicate their leadership, because they might be attacked and lose votes.”

Significantly, Lippmann also believed that “the world [Americans] have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (*Public Opinion* 15), eclipsed, for the general voting public, by the more average concerns of everyday life. Dewey, who differs from Lippmann in his belief that “the goal [of democratic involvement] must be to develop integrated selves for citizens, not split selves” (Schutz 307), agrees with this, writing that “persons have always been, for the most part, taken up with their . . . immediate work and play. The power of ‘bread and the circus’ to divert attention from public matters is an old story,” he asserts (Dewey *Public* 137-138), and “the increase in number, variety and cheapness of amusements represents a powerful diversion from political concern” (138). As a result, Dewey claims, in modern times “the political elements in the constitution of the human being, those having to do with citizenship, are crowded to one side” (139). In addition to this, Lippmann supposes that the increasing complexities of legislation nullify the prospect of practical, well-informed intervention on the part of the average democratic citizen. “Man is no Aristotelian god contemplating all existence at one glance,” he writes (*Public Opinion* 15); hence, even if one desired to do so, attempting intellectual and political involvement in all areas of public policy would necessitate the impossible feat of becoming, in Dewey’s words, “what Lippmann has well called . . . [an] ‘omni-competent’ individual: competent to frame policies, to judge their results; competent to know in all situations demanding political action what is for his own good, and competent to enforce his idea of good and the will to effect it against contrary forces” (*Public* 158).

According to MacGilvray, Lippmann “is on solid empirical ground when he attributes public apathy and ignorance to the remoteness and complexity of modern political life. There is undoubtedly a very real limit to the possible (and desirable) extent of direct public involvement in politics under current circumstances, and Lippmann goes a long way toward specifying that limit” (557). “Thus,” writes Mark Whipple, “the crisis of democracy results, Lippmann argued, not from too little, but from too much democracy” (160). Although it is difficult to imagine Dewey conceiving of “too much democracy,” to borrow Whipple’s phrase, he does generally concur with Lippmann’s appraisal, stating that

there was a time when a man might entertain a few general political principles and apply them with some confidence. A citizen believed in states’ rights or in a centralized government; in free trade or protection. It did not involve much mental strain to imagine that by throwing in his lot with one party or another he could express his views that his belief would count in government. (*Public* 131-132)

Both men, however, believed that this time had passed by the 1920s, and in support of this point Dewey offers multiple illustrations, including the prohibition of alcohol and the legislation of shipping tariffs and railroads, of which the average citizen has little technical knowledge and which generally fail to generate sufficient public interest to inspire the widespread dissemination of the appropriate technical data (132-134). Using the regulation of tariffs as an example, Dewey writes that, “for the average voter,”

the tariff question is a complicated medley of infinite detail, schedules of rates specific and *ad volorem* on countless things, many of which he does not recognize by name, and with respect to which he can form no judgment. Probably not one voter in a thousand even reads the scores of pages in which the rates of toll are enumerated and he would not be much wiser if he did. The average man gives it up as a bad job. At election time, appeal to some time-worn slogan may galvanize him into a temporary notion that he has convictions on an important subject, but except for manufacturers and dealers who have some interest at stake in this or that schedule, belief lacks the

qualities that attach to beliefs about matters of a personal concern. Industry is too complex and intricate. (132)

Lippmann had previously asserted that “there is an inner circle” in politics “surrounded by concentric circles which fade out gradually into the disinterested or uninterested rank and file” (*Public Opinion* 124), and this mirrors, to a degree, Dewey’s gloss of a vested minority possessed of esoteric knowledge and a general polity that is not—and, realistically, cannot be—apprised of all the ins and outs of political action in a modern democracy. There is, however, a critical difference in the two men’s assessments of the situation at large, and that difference is interest.

In *Public Opinion*, after claiming that the American political world is “out of reach” for the average citizen (15), Lippmann maintains that “the number of ways is limited in which a multitude of people can act directly upon a situation beyond their reach” (125):

some of them can migrate, in one form or another, they can strike or boycott, they can applaud or hiss. They can by these means occasionally resist what they do not like, or coerce those who obstruct what they desire. But by mass action nothing can be constructed, devised, negotiated or administered. . . . The limit of direct action is for all practical purposes the power to say Yes or No on an issue presented to the mass. (125)

Thus, according to Lippmann, the “concentric circles” outside of the main body of political policy-makers have little say in the pragmatics and practicalities of government even in a democratic state, resulting in the “disinterested or uninterested rank and file” to which the commentator refers (124). In effect, he writes, “choices are presented by the energetic coteries who hustle about with petitions and round up the delegates. The Many can elect after the Few have nominated” (127), and the situation perpetuates itself indefinitely as it heightens the political indifference of the masses and results in still more power, and increased freedom of political action, for

those in the inner circle. This state of affairs is born of the voting public's fundamental disinterest in the minutiae of legislation, itself a complication resting upon the fact that—as opposed to the political insiders, who have “particular men they hope to see elected, particular balance sheets they wish to see approved, concrete objectives that must be obtained” (123)—the average member of “the rank and file” (124) deals, politically, “almost wholly with abstractions” (123). It is argued that “the massive scale of organization required to accommodate larger and more complex communities is to blame” and that “no individual is any longer able to master the knowledge necessary to consult actively in his or her own governance” (Koritz 117) – but, critically, Lippmann also implies that the average citizen, even if they managed to amass the knowledge required to do so, would choose not to intervene directly in government, preferring instead to entrust their political wellbeing to dedicated representatives whose sole task is to engage in the debate, ratification, and facilitation of public policy.

In Lippmann's opinion, then, because “human nature [is] passive and basically irrational” (Whipple 159), “ordinary citizens do not govern; they watch, leaving the running of things to properly trained experts” (Koritz 116). Convinced that a modern constituency tends innately toward political disinterest and that “the masses [are] naturally and structurally unable to form intelligent, democratic publics” (Whipple 160)—making the existence of concentric circles of coinciding interest and political power a necessary and inevitable fact of the democratic process—Lippmann argues that “distance alone lends enchantment to the view that masses of human beings ever coöperate [*sic*] in any complex affair without a central machine managed by a very few people.” “Landslides,” he claims, “can turn one machine out and put another in; revolutions sometimes abolish a particular machine altogether . . . but nowhere does

the machine disappear. Nowhere is the idyllic theory of democracy realized” (*Public Opinion* 124). In contrast, Dewey believed that the issue of a so-called democratic society comprising an under-informed citizenry and a ruling political elite was brought about by the demands of “the machine age” (Dewey *Public* 126) and could eventually be rectified once man learned to deal with his new circumstances, resulting in a civic renaissance of sorts and creating an enlightened, communicative and politically responsible society that he dubbed “the ‘Great Community’” (Koritz 121).

In *The Public and Its Problems*’ intrinsically idealistic—and, when compared to Walter Lippman’s point of view, frankly optimistic—evaluation of participatory democracy, Dewey writes that “the democratic public is still largely inchoate and unorganized” (109) and claims that “political apathy, which is a natural product of the discrepancies between actual practices and [the] traditional machinery [of government], ensues from inability to identify one’s self with definite issues” (134-135). Such “definite” political issues, he writes, (meaning, in this context, issues that are of a nature completely comprehensible to the average citizen) “are hard to find and locate in the vast complexities of current life” (135). The philosopher opposes so-called “spectator theory” (H. Lee 51) and supposes that all free human beings retain an innate interest in matters relating to their own governance, as shown by democracy’s success in the west, and he argues that the lack of political interest evident in contemporary society is largely due to the frustration and confusion caused by the daunting intricacies, slow pace and innumerable technicalities of modern democracy’s inner workings, which, perhaps understandably, can be at times both glacial and labyrinthine. He characterizes “the history of municipal politics” as being one which “shows in most cases a flare-up of intense interest followed by a period of indifference” (Dewey *Public* 136-137) and writes that

the very size, heterogeneity and nobility [*sic*] of urban populations, the vast capital required, [and] the technical character of the . . . problems involved, soon tire the attention of the average voter. . . . The ramification of the issues before the public is so wide and intricate, the technical matters involved are so specialized, the details are so many and so shifting, that the public cannot for any length of time identify and hold itself. (137)

The academic contends, however, that the veil of confusion discouraging democratic involvement can be lifted through proper civic education and participation encouraged by increasing local interaction, and, for Dewey, this means that democracy's current problems revolve around the public's lack of community involvement.

In Dewey's model of civic engagement, "as citizens solve local problems and discuss shared situations within associations, the deliberations spill over into communication between associations" (Kosnoski 672), thus joining the individuals comprising centralized and intimate local groups into an articulated polity capable of engaging in the deliberation of regional issues, which, in turn, has similar ramifications for the formation of sound state and federal electorates. The resulting political unity does not, of course, imply complete agreement on all issues, only a coherent democratic citizenry capable of debating issues in successively widening fora ranging from the neighborly to the national, and in this context "'interest' should not be interpreted as a national conformity of individual interests, but instead [a shared] interest in public occurrences" (672). Conversely, Dewey also argues that natural communication—the kind of communication fostered by local, face-to-face interaction—raises individuals' awareness of contemporary issues, localizes the ramifications of abstract policy decisions, and fosters political care and acumen, resulting in a well-informed constituency who will, by exercising their right to vote, effectively shape those policies with the potential to directly affect their communities. Therefore, as Kosnoski observes, the philosopher's view of political interaction is one

in which “deliberation about local problems assists citizens in adapting to the rapidly fluctuating public institutions and systems that characterize contemporary politics” (672) while simultaneously assisting in the formation of a codified and thoroughly effective modern democratic public. Basically, Dewey believes that when issues are localized and demystified, frustration and apathy will give way to a groundswell of political interest and a resurgence of democratic participation; he is committed to the idea that “democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community” (Dewey *Public* 213), which is a hypothesis that he equates to earlier and, in his mind, much more successful models of American democracy.

According to Dewey’s evaluation, democracy was initially successful in the United States because “American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life, that is, association in local and small centers where industry was mainly agricultural and where production was carried on mainly with hand tools. It took form when English political habits and legal institutions worked under pioneer conditions” (111). As such, “it may be argued that the democratic movement was essentially transitional. It marked the passage from feudal institutions to industrialization” (204), and that transition, having been accomplished, renders it fundamentally obsolete. This is not particularly surprising as in his article “John Dewey and ‘a Paradox of Size’: Democratic Faith at the Limits of Experience” (2001), Aaron Schutz claims that “because the world is constantly changing, any particular form [of democracy] is always somewhat obsolete as soon as it is brought into being” (307). American democracy, according to this interpretation, is in its original form inapplicable to a non-agrarian, post-industrial revolution nation and must be reorganized, modernized, or even wholly reconceptualized in order to be effective in the present day. Whereas Lippmann thought democracy had outgrown the American

public—he “saw the naive and well-intentioned voter gazing out at an increasingly complex world through the eyes of a provincial small-town citizen” (McCormack 187)—Dewey believed that America had outgrown its democracy. “We have inherited, in short, local town-meeting practices and ideas,” he writes, “but we live and act and have our being in a continental national state. We are held together by non-political bonds, and the political forms are stretched and legal institutions patched in an *ad hoc* and improvised manner to do the work they have to do” (*Public* 113-114), resulting in an ineffective form of democracy that begets equally ineffective citizenship in that such citizenship is based upon traditional, “town-meeting” definitions of civic responsibility and political inclusion (113) and is therefore ill-equipped to deal with policies of a continental nature possessed of, in many cases, truly global ramifications. “The old principles do not fit contemporary life as it is lived,” the philosopher claims, “however well they may have expressed the vital interests of the times in which they arose” (135).

Thousands feel their hollowness even if they cannot make their feeling articulate. The confusion which has resulted from the size and ramifications of social activities has rendered men skeptical of the efficiency of political action. Who is sufficient unto these things? Men feel that they are caught in the sweep of forces too vast to understand or master. Thought is brought to a standstill and action paralyzed. (135)

In effect, the United States’ government, as it was organized in the 1920s, was in Dewey’s mind ill-adapted to deal with its rapidly-expanding, industrial, and cosmopolitan population in the same way that the American polity, in its concurrent form, was unable to practically determine the political actions of its governors. The critic saw this anachronistic deployment of democracy as creating inconsistencies in government and as distancing the elected from the electorate, that distance, in turn, constituting a major hurdle for the democratic process because, although it is also

shaped by social factors, democracy—for Dewey—is an inherently personal and individual process. The philosopher had earlier written, in “The Ethics of Democracy” (1888), that “personal responsibility” and “individual initiation” are “the notes of democracy” (*The Political Writings* 61), and he expands this definition in *The Public and Its Problems* by stating that

singular persons are the foci of action, mental and moral, as well as overt. They are subject to all kinds of social influences which determine *what* they can think of, plan and choose. The conflicting streams of social influence come to a single and conclusive issue only in personal consciousness and deed. When a public is generated, the same law holds. It arrives at decisions, makes terms, and executes resolves only through the medium of individuals. They are officers; they represent a Public, but the Public acts through them. We say in a country like our own that legislators and executives are elected by the public. That phrase might appear to indicate that the Public acts. But, after all, individual men and women exercise the franchise; the public is here a collective name for a multitude of persons each voting as an anonymous unit. (75)

This view of the polity directly contradicts Lippmann’s view of government as “energetic coteries” (*Public Opinion* 127) comprising an “inner circle” (124) wherein “the Many can elect after the Few have nominated” (127), because “as a citizen-voter” each individual in the polity “is . . . an officer of the public. He expresses his will as a representative of the public interest as much so as does a senator or sheriff” (Dewey *Public* 75). This, then, is where the concept of interest that divides Lippmann’s and Dewey’s work comes to a head: while they agree on the symptoms and, to an extent, the causes of modern civic disengagement, their visions of the polity as being fundamentally disinterested and fundamentally interested, respectively, drive the two men to propose divergent solutions.

Walter Lippmann believed that “the great failing of radical democratic theory had been its belief that every citizen . . . possessed the knowledge of the world necessary for governing” (Westbrook 296-297), which informed his opinion, as

espoused in *The Phantom Public*, that “popular participation in public affairs . . . should be held to an absolute minimum” (Westbrook 299). He maintained that “an active public was neither necessary nor desirable for modern democratic government” (308) and that democracy should be perpetrated on behalf of the public by a dedicated, informed group of elites as “ordinary citizens have neither the competence nor the power to intervene directly in [the] public policy matters affecting them” (Koritz 115). This system, he argues in *Public Opinion*, would allow the citizenry at large to “escape from the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs” (17). However, he also contends “that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible” to the voting public (17) so that they can elect their political leaders and hold them to account. As befitting a man whose journalistic career would later earn him the Pulitzer Prize (twice – once in 1958 and again in 1962), Lippmann proposes the media as one such intermediary institution, and his model “depends upon devising standards of living and methods of audit by which the acts of public officials and industrial directors are measured” (171). Reiterating his belief that the public is not capable of controlling all of its governors’ actions, he writes that “we cannot ourselves inspire or guide these acts, as the mystical democrat has always imagined. But we can steadily increase our real control over these acts by insisting that all of them shall be plainly recorded, and their results objectively measured” (171). Lippmann’s solution to the problems of modern representative democracy, therefore, turns on the dedicated actions of a political ruling class and on the conscientious reporting, by “an independent, expert organization” (17), of those actions to the

mainstream public – and, although he understands “well and up close the communication distortions of modern mass media structures” (Whipple 164) and admits that the press “is too frail to carry the whole burden of sovereignty, to supply spontaneously the truth which democrats hoped was inborn” (Lippmann *Public Opinion* 196), he claims that this scheme is the best practical response to America’s concurrent political situation as it would streamline the governmental process and free the average citizen from the burden of ‘omni-competence.’

In his article “The Trouble with Experts – and Why Democracies Need Them,” Michael Schudson, when contextualizing the “Dewey/Lippmann exchange” as “preface to a much more thorough-going attack on expertise in the 1960s and after” (492), observes that “for many thinkers, [the matter of] expertise is a permanent embarrassment to democratic theory” (491). There are two reasons for this. First and foremost, as Lippmann and Dewey recognized, is the fact that it is difficult for the average voter to reconcile quotidian experience with political proficiency. The second reason expertise rankles democratic theorists is that it can, in practice, pervert the course of government. Dewey, of course, is not oblivious to this thorn; in fact, he believed that “experts, like any other class of rulers, ultimately speak for their own private interests rather than for the public interest” (492). He saw the immediate pragmatic value of Lippmann’s proposal but “clung to a view of human nature that emphasized its active, experiential, and rational nature” rather than believing, like Lippmann, in humanity’s fundamentally “passive” and “irrational” character (Whipple 159), resulting in a staunch refusal to admit—or even entertain a belief in—the necessity of a ruling political elite. Ever the idealistic democrat, Dewey preferred long-term solutions that give power to the individuals of the electorate and thus have the potential to advance his vision of the Great Community. As a philosopher and

educator, he diagnosed “the problem of a democratically organized public [as] primarily and essentially an intellectual problem,” albeit one “in a degree to which the political affairs of prior ages offer no parallel” (Dewey *Public* 126), and his belief that “the machine age” (126) had “created by steam and electricity” a “Great Society” (98) but simultaneously “invaded and partially disintegrated the smaller communities of former times without generating a Great Community” (127) worried him because of his conviction that lack of community adversely affects the character and quality of America’s democratic process. In *The Public and Its Problems*, he maintains that

the invasion and partial destruction of [local associations] by outside uncontrolled agencies is the immediate source of the instability . . . and restlessness of the present epoch. Evils which are uncritically and indiscriminately laid at the door of industrialization and democracy might, with greater intelligence, be referred to the dislocation and unsettlement of local communities. (211-212)

Further underscoring the philosopher’s belief that a return to coherent community existence is integral to America’s continued democratic viability is his statement that “the problem of securing [the] diffused and seminal intelligence” which the polity needs to govern itself “can only be solved in the degree in which local communal life becomes reality” (217-218).

By emphasizing the importance of local contact Dewey remains “committed to [a] pluralist conception of the state” which renders it a ““form of association”” ““secondary”” to that of the communicative neighborhood (Westbrook 303). “The generation of democratic communities and an articulate democratic public,” he writes (Dewey *Public* 217), “trenches upon the question of practical re-formation of social conditions” (211) because “individual men and women exercise the franchise” (75) and, for individuals, “the actuality of mind” needed for effective civic engagement “is dependent upon the education which social conditions effect” (209). “Indubitably,”

Dewey contends, “one great trouble at present is that the data for good [political] judgment are lacking; and no innate faculty of mind can make up for the absence of facts” (209). Thus “the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion,” the need for which he calls “*the* problem of the public,” “depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions” (208) – that is, the improvement of political discourse, and the public’s subsequent reengagement in the democratic process, is contingent upon the education of the masses. Dewey’s conception of democratic education is “bound up with the very idea of education as a freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims” (*Democracy and Education* 98), and as his political philosophy also centers on “individual initiation” and social responsibility (*The Political Writings* 61) it makes sense that he would unite the two in his proposed solution to the country’s then-current (and arguably ongoing) crisis of civic identity. Unlike Lippmann, Dewey is convinced that the electorate needs neither an intermediary institution to filter its information nor a ruling political elite; he believes that it is capable of the competence required for true self-government if reorganized socially and educated democratically.

Whipple traces the line of the Lippmann-Dewey debate through Schumpeter (*Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*; 1950), Lipset (*Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*; 1964) and Habermas (*The Theory of Communicative Action* Volumes 1 & 2; 1984, 1987) (Whipple 160-161; 167-168) and into the communication distortions of modern media conglomerates (172-173), showing the continued relevance of its underlying precepts. Essentially, “Dewey faced what Jane Mansbridge . . . called ‘a paradox of size’” (Schutz 288) wherein “the workplaces and small collectives that permit intensive participation cannot easily deploy power on a

large scale, while those that can deploy such power cannot provide the opportunity for much effective participation” (Mansbridge 172), with the result that “the kinds of rich, collaborative, democratic practices Dewey most valued seem ineffective on a broad social scale” (Schutz 288). In effect, “Dewey was attempting to conceptualize how participatory democracy could survive in the face of technological and social changes that were effacing the importance of place and highlighting the ignorance on which local opinion was often based” (Koritz 120), but for Lippmann, whose “view of the public is closely aligned with consumerism,” “voting for a candidate is no different from selecting an automobile or buying tickets to a play” since the voter no more picks a party’s candidate and contributes to their platform than they build the automobile or help stage the theatrical production (116). The idea of watching a play is particularly relevant here as Whipple writes that “by emphasizing vision, the democratic process for Lippmann becomes something in which citizens do not actively participate, but passively watch—they become spectators rather than participants” (160), and in keeping with the market-driven theme of modern politics Schudson also dubs economically-minded political action “a kind of price comparison shopping” wherein “if voters are faced with an open seat where two or more candidates vie for a position where there is no incumbent in the race, party label—the closest politics offers to a brand name—may weigh very heavily” (“Equivalence” 199). Similarly, in Koritz’s gloss of Lippman’s model a choice is made between a few pre-selected candidates, but the decision is more akin to picking the color of the car or choosing which play to attend than to having any say in their actual development, which example is useful in explaining the central tenet of the pundit’s position. Nor is the commentator’s move away from traditional political thinking and toward a more consumeristic approach isolated as his work also acknowledges

general shifts in several other areas of American life during this period including, but not limited to, the advent of a professional culture based primarily on “technical competence” rather than apprenticeship, the rise and proliferation of bureaucratic organizations, and “the emergence of mass consumerism as the new mechanism for defining and organizing communal identity” (Koritz 117). The American public of Lippmann’s era, becoming distanced from the political process and increasingly preoccupied with “mass consumerism” as the foundation of shared identity (117), was placing less importance than had previous generations on the civic affiliations and duties which had traditionally defined one’s status as American, allowing a shift to occur wherein individuals began to equate belonging to a certain community with the consumption of the goods and services they believed typical of their desired social set.

This sort of thinking is exemplified by Yeziarska, who, Koritz writes, “associated citizenship with a sense of belonging and acceptance” rather than with “civic or political engagement” (112). As such, “Yeziarska’s novels define citizenship in cultural, rather than political, terms” (112), and with this fundamental disengaging of politics and citizenship well underway during the writer’s emigration to the United States as a child in or around 1890 (Gornick *vii*), it seems inevitable that her stories would address the issue in detail. Her work, in fact, almost interminably preoccupied with immigrants struggling to become American via education, dress, grooming, and initiation into the middle-class through displays of wealth and fashion, can be seen as a microcosm of the larger conversation about citizenship being undertaken in the United States during the height of her writing career. It is not inconsequential that her two most enduring works, *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers*, were published around the same time as Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*, respectively, as both writers were actively engaging in the same

dialogue about citizenship despite the absence in Yezierska's novels of anything resembling, in the traditional civic sense, democratic participation in the American political process. For the immigrants of Yezierska's generation, the financial success that enabled participation in American consumer culture was a mark of integration into their adopted land, hence the author's work examines the process of attaining citizenship via economic acculturation rather than traditional naturalization. Many of the writer's contemporaries also describe the immigrant experience as being pulled by or caught between two worlds and reify alternative paths to citizenship while championing varying degrees of assimilation or cultural plurality. What separates Yezierska from her peers, however, is the author's use of her own protagonists' attitudes against them and, critically, her use of the fundamentally paradoxical and hypocritical flaws inherent in her own alternative paradigms to undermine those paradigms' potential as either assimilative or transcendent solutions to the problem of immigrant otherness. These self-defeating arguments give her work a marked depth and diversity of interpretation that exemplifies her skill as a writer and allows for the continued relevance of her texts as more than mere historical documents cataloguing a contemporary woman's interpretation of the era's Jewish immigrant milieu.

On the other side of this argument, Dewey opposed Lippmann's reading of modern political action as a consumerist trope. Hoping to deal with the civic disengagement that allowed "Americanness" (Koritz 121) to be defined in financial rather than political terms by appealing to "the vibrant life of local communities" and using education to "imbue children with democratic values" (Schutz 302; Kosnoski 656), thereby encouraging "informed and effective" civic participation later in life (Koritz 120), Dewey was drawn to "the spontaneous and unrepressed emotionalism of Yezierska's personality" when he encountered her in a university setting (120). Like

the relationship between the characters of Sonya Vrunsky and John Manning (who, like so many of the writer's native-born males, seems to be at least partially based on Dewey, who, after their falling out, "blazed in her psyche as [representative of] the genteel America forever beyond her grasp"; Gornick *viii*), the young woman's passionate, dramatic, and sometimes explosive manner was of "a style understood and accommodated in the Jewish ghetto but foreign to the habits of emotional restraint nurtured in Anglo-Saxon families" (Koritz 120-121) and the philosopher sought in her "a way to balance and unify the emotional and intellectual, the mind and the body, the individual and the community" (121). The resulting relationship was, for Dewey, "part of a failed attempt to imagine a community of shared interests and values that might unify a fragmented and disengaged citizenry into . . . the 'Great Community'" (121), and it was unsuccessful, in large part, because of the disparity of their views on how to become a valued member of American society and their differing opinions over just what constituted such 'value.'

Mark Warren identifies a belief, which he dubs "the *self-transformation thesis*" (209), that is frequently espoused by proponents of local civic interaction. This thesis "has a history extending from Rousseau, J. S. Mill, and Dewey to contemporary participatory democrats such as C. B. Macpherson, Benjamin Barber, Carole Pateman, and Jürgen Habermas" (209-210) and maintains that individuals involved "in a range of institutions . . . such as workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and city organizations" develop "democratic dispositions" and become "more tolerant of difference, more sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and judgment, and more prone to examin[ing] their own preferences" – all of which, theorists claim, are "conducive to the success of democracy as a way of making decisions" (209). "While there are important differences within this tradition,"

Warren writes, “participatory democrats share the view that the self is constituted through interactions with its social context” (210), which would seem to accord with Yeziarska’s conviction that citizenship is forged in a social setting rather than a political one. There are, however, some key points on which her philosophy differs from Dewey’s. Dewey’s “utopian vision” (MacGilvray 561) held that citizens have value when they contribute to their community, and to democracy as a whole, in an informed, moral and conscientious manner – but “as critics of Dewey (for example, C. Wright Mills and, more recently, Jeffrey Lustig) have argued, [his] social thought can be disturbingly ambiguous—even naive—about its actual political consequences and implications” (Posnock 120). Indeed, amongst the “standard criticisms” of the philosopher’s work is the fact that he is frequently “taken to task for failing to provide credible solutions to the problems which he raises” (MacGilvray 560), and despite his “refashioning of philosophy as cultural criticism” (Posnock 286) (which implies less need for proposing practicable reforms) and Kosnoski’s claim that he viewed his own theoretical and discursive exemplars as “ideal models best used as provocations to reform and not actual blueprints” (673) it is difficult to avoid feeling some degree of intellectual frustration when faced with his nebulous conceptual frameworks and their lack of concrete proposals regarding the twin foci of social rehabilitation and political regeneration. His works’ overarching paucity of solid, substantial solutions is all the more agitating given his widely-accepted status as one of—if not *the*—most influential democratic theorist of the twentieth century and argues, perhaps, for a reevaluation of his critical impact.⁴⁷ This glut of theory and concomitant lack of

⁴⁷ Significantly, scholars such as Mills, Lustig and Cornel West have engaged in critiques of Dewey’s political philosophy for this very reason. In his notes to *The Trial of Curiosity*, Posnock claims that “West shrewdly argues for Mills’s anxiety of influence regarding Dewey” (309), which stands in direct contrast to the more traditional view of Dewey as being “the embodiment of America’s most sensitive conscience, constructive intelligence, and intense democratic faith,” as Sidney Ratner wrote in his foreword to 1940’s *The Philosopher of the Common Man* (7). Indeed, as that work’s very title

action seems to have frustrated Yezierska, and as she viewed becoming American “as an act of individual self-fashioning” (Koritz 120)—which, to put it in context, resonates with James Madison’s belief that “good citizenship is essential to self-determination, which is mankind’s highest goal” (Dimock 23)—and valued community for the practical and emotional support of its personal relationships rather than for its idealized democratic potential, she and Dewey “were bound to misunderstand each other” (Koritz 120). Unable to reconcile their views on American identity despite Dewey’s vocal denunciation of “the [era’s] political repression and coercive Americanization” (Westbrook 278), the two eventually parted ways. The opinions at the core of their split, however, continued to be argued in the public sphere, and by many other writers, well after they left each others’ company.

Redefining America(ns): Yezierska’s Hidden Legacy

While the debate over these issues was progressing, one of the primary benefits of citizenship—the right to vote—was granted to women in the United States by the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, effectively doubling the size of the country’s electorate. Despite this, however, “political engagement, measured by voting, plummeted in [the subsequent] decade, while the realm of political citizenship became increasingly dominated by white middle-class elites”

suggests, most of its contributors “are bound by admiration and affection for John Dewey” and engage in suitably biased “tribute[s] to [his] many-sided genius” (7). Although such intellectual pandering is an extreme example of the unmitigated esteem in which he is sometimes held, it is enlightening in that it shows the exaggerated deference often accorded to Dewey’s work and personality. Given his obvious affinity for his subject, Ratner’s subsequent claim that Dewey is “the American philosopher who has most concerned himself with the origins, import, and consequences of all problems and their proposed solutions in terms of the life and destiny of the common man” (7-8) is also suspect.

(Koritz 115). According to Liette Gidlow, “the advent of nearly universal suffrage helped to create a crisis of meaning for ideas about citizenship” which coincided with the widespread commercialization of the United States, convinced a large segment of the population that “citizenship was not necessarily about voting,” and “played an important part in the making of middle-class and elite civic dominance” while simultaneously—and paradoxically—contributing to “widespread nonvoting” amongst the rest of populace (8). The declension of voting as a public mode of democratic expression—which can be observed in Yeziarska’s work by the complete absence of traditional civic engagement in spite of both the contemporary conferment of suffrage and the stories’ feminist overtones—lends credence to Koritz and Lippmann’s theories about civic identity and responsibility in the early twentieth century. Michael Schudson notes that

American political life in the late nineteenth century was more participatory and more enthusiastic than at any other point in [the nation’s] history, with election turnouts routinely in the 70 to 80 percent range. Vast numbers of people participated in election campaigns in torchlight processions, brass band concerts, parades, picnics, pole raisings, and other activities that shocked visitors to [its] shores. (“Equivalence” 200)

However, a number of factors—including comprehensive, Progressive-led electoral reform, the rise of mass produced goods, and the establishment of a burgeoning, if somewhat homogenized middle class defined by its consumerist tendencies—conspired to reduce this involvement considerably, leading to ever more vocal democratic lamentations from Dewey and his contemporaries. In his article “The Troubling Equivalence of Citizen and Consumer,” Schudson lists some of the reforms that helped efface such energetic political involvement. “The Progressives,” he writes,

wanted electoral campaigns focused on issues, not on the military-like recruitment of long-standing partisans. They urged secret ballots, rather than the standard public distribution of party tickets at the polls for voters to place

in the ballot box and return for a convivial reward at the party's favorite saloon thereafter. They fought for primary elections to remove from party hacks the power to choose candidates. They sponsored laws for initiatives and referenda to place complex legislative matters directly before the voters, providing a new check on the power of party-controlled legislatures from [*sic*] doing whatever they pleased. (201)

Although the reformers sought to cleanse government of the questionable practices, such as those described by Abraham Cahan when David Levinsky reminisces about “the bargaining, the haggling between buyer and seller” attending the “open business” of trafficking in votes on Election Day (Cahan *Levinsky* 128), of thoroughly partisan political machines, “what they accomplished . . . was to reduce voter turnout from more than 70 percent in the 1880s and 1890s to less than 50 percent by the 1920s” (Schudson “Equivalence” 201). They effected “a kind of Protestant Reformation, removing the idols and the incense from the political church” and “offering a politics cleansed of the souvenirs, the sensuous experience, and the small everyday rewards that once enhanced political life. No more election day hooliganism, or at least a lot less; no more festivity, no more emotionalism and . . . team-style loyalties” (201).

While Schudson concedes that the “sharp decline” in subsequent voter turnout “was no doubt a product of many forces,” he employs consumerist language when he contends that “these included what we might think of as the de-branding or unbranding of politicians, forcing individual voters to read the package ingredients rather than just the party logo on the package” (201). Agreeing with Walter Lippmann, he states that “elections, like markets, limit choices. In a way, that is precisely the purpose of elections” (194). This assessment reiterates “the commensurability of buying and voting” (194-195). However, it is important to note that in the United States, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the waning of one was coincident with the waxing of the other. With alternative, and arguably more accessible and tangible ways of identifying oneself as American (such as the purchase

and display of culturally specific clothing, the acquisition of relevant goods, and the utilization of certain services as signifiers of cultural viability in an increasingly consumer-oriented society), voting, as representative of the civic mindset which had previously been integral to the idea of citizenship, was becoming a secondary, subordinate way of aligning oneself with others as part of a given community. Antin, Cahan, Cohen and Yeziarska, along with their fellow immigrants, were therefore thrust, upon arriving in the United States, into an environment in which voting, military service, civil disobedience, and other forms of civic activity were diminishing in importance as expressions of American citizenship while increasingly inventive displays of fashion, purchasing power, and social status were being elevated to take their place. Given their status as outsiders and many individuals' desires to traverse the quickest and most effective route toward receiving the coveted appellation of 'American' as was available, it seems inevitable that such socioeconomic and material displays of belonging would eventually supplant traditional, political citizenship as the desired means of acculturation in many new immigrant communities. In correlation, it is also unsurprising that this process would receive widespread attention in the fiction generated by new immigrants writing in, and about, those communities.

With all of this history to inform it, it would be easy to assess *Salome of the Tenements* as reactionary. Modern readers can be tempted to label it a product of its mass-producing, bourgeois-aspiring, commodity-consuming era, as an immigrant writer's paean to American consumerism and fashion or, dangerously, as a disillusioned response to Dewey's democratic ideals, but—all danger of using the author's propagandized biographical details to interpret her work aside—these interpretations of the text underestimate both Yeziarska's skill as a writer and the narrative's ability to function on multiple levels. Likewise, to assume that the novel is

a product of its time in that it buys into consumerism as the emerging mass culture's preeminent criterion for social and cultural inclusion does the same. Critics have long acknowledged the effect Dewey's philosophy had on Yeziarska's writing, and the criticisms of his work that she weaves into her stories can be construed as a sort of literary rebuttal of his socio-civic precepts; however, although she appears to at first glance, Anzia Yeziarska does not flatly reject Dewey's ideas about cultural interaction and civic engagement in *Salome*, nor does she reify the novel's framework of consumerist citizenship as a completely viable alternative to those ideas. In point of fact, the author declines to advance a portrait of successful monothematic citizenship (such as that obtained, hypothetically speaking, through the process of naturalization and the conferment of the title of 'American' as a purely legal designation) while also deconstructing the attainment of alternative 'citizenship' via socioeconomic acculturation, and in doing so she undermines both the traditional, legal form of citizenship and Vrunsky's proposed alternative. Instead, if we take as our model Walter Parker's three conceptions of citizenship—these being 'traditional,' in which an individual understands "how government works (how a bill becomes a law, for example)" and retains "commitments to core democratic values . . . such as freedom of speech or liberty in general" (Westheimer & Kahne 238-239), 'progressive,' whose adherents "share a similar commitment to this knowledge" but "embrace visions such as 'strong democracy' . . . and place a greater emphasis on civic participation" (239), and 'advanced,' which "builds on the progressive perspective but adds careful attention to inherent tensions between pluralism and assimilation or to . . . the 'politics of recognition'" (239)—Yeziarska emerges as someone concerned with advanced notions of citizenship that are not limited to either 'traditional' or 'progressive' practices. Konzett maintains that "Yeziarska use[s] Dewey's pragmatic social and

civic concepts to articulate a modernist aesthetics concerned with the redefinition of democracy and its essential relation to the experience of immigration and ethnicity” (*Modernisms* 22), and this aesthetics, when paired with the author’s refusal to endorse either legal or consumerist citizenship within the confines of the novel, effectively lets the story argue its own points. The result is a layering of ideals that the main character’s—and the country’s—social, cultural and economic upheaval twists, unseats and rearranges like so many geologic strata; and, as in geological research, the protagonist—and the reader—must penetrate these layers to reach the story’s true ideological core.

The first layer, though rarely addressed in the text, is conspicuous by its absence: it is the traditional, the legal and political, status of ‘citizen’ which Yeziarska ignores as largely inapplicable in the day-to-day lives of Jewish immigrants in New York City’s Lower East Side. This omission of political concern, and Vrunsky’s forswearing of political ties in favor of “‘the democracy of beauty’” (Yeziarska *Salome* 27), sets the stage for the entire novel; it gives the legal-political discourse attached to naturalized citizenship a subtle vote of no confidence with regard to socio-cultural acceptance, and it allows for the presentation of alternative models of civic engagement within the confines of the text. The second layer, which dominates roughly three-quarters of the novel, is Vrunsky’s alternative paradigm, “‘the democracy of beauty.’” This layer, as I have suggested, is principally concerned with the thoroughly semiotic process of affecting American identity through consumerism and with discussing the ramifications of realigning an inherently civic identification to one that is primarily associated with economic ascendance. The third layer is a fundamentally subversive one; it involves the discrediting of the aforementioned consumerist and character-driven paradigm via the catastrophic failure of the

Vrunsky-Manning marriage, and it reveals the author's underlying ambivalence to any and all modes of American identification (or re-identification) which require the erasure of ethnicity via the "selective amnesia" (Stubbs "Material" 169) of "Anglo-Conformity" (King 85). The fourth layer is one in which the reader is presented with the Vrunsky-Hollins Grand Street store and promised a 'fulfilling ever-after' replete with airtight artistic integrity, transcendent moral superiority, fitting social justice, and balanced American/immigrant identity, and it provides a tidy ending to a narrative built around a set of messy acculturational problems. There is, however, a fifth, textually unspecified layer which bears consideration and is integral to the interpretation of the novel as a whole.

In *Salome*'s final layer, the story's seemingly triumphant resolution, with all of its implied positive transgressivity, is negated by Sonya's own hypocritical strictures and "reinscribes the very hierarchies [it] initially appear[s] to transgress" (Stubbs "Material" 170), resulting in a finale that is not as radical or subversive as it first appears. "Yeziarska . . . injects black humor and irony into her rhetoric, which ultimately calls any character's point of view into question," Konzett writes (*Modernisms* 43);

in *Salome*, this biting wit manifests itself not only in the mocking treatment of the Dewey character but also in that of the heroine as she attempts to escape the ghetto. Note, for example, Sonya's many irrational outbursts about her need for beauty, put forth in the high-flown pathos of Immigrant English . . . or her pathetic cries to Hollins, the designer. (43)

Working in tandem with the hypocrisy apparent in the forthcoming Grand Street store, the author's "black humor and irony" subvert the narrative's tidy resolution and impart to the reader a sense of uneasy suspicion; indeed, they imbue Sonya's actions with an inherent unreliability and make her journey, and its resolution, seem

decidedly disingenuous. Thus the fifth layer of the novel's ideology presents two points of view—the radical and the hypocritical—and leaves the reader to moderate between the two, resulting in an active reading of the text in which the audience ultimately has to decide which, if any, is the proper path to citizenship. Although, as Stubbs notes, it “serves as an intriguing illustration of . . . the innovative consumption practices of many Jewish immigrants” and “engages in a nuanced exploration of the economics of ‘taste,’” which she defines as “the way in which class membership is in part performed through an awareness of distinctions between commodities” (“Material” 170), the novel ultimately refrains from effecting a damning deconstructing of America's economic system as doing so would efface what could, with due reform, become a powerful acculturational tool for the immigrant population, but this, rather than being a weakness, is part of its enduring strength. Ultimately, as Stephanie Foote writes of Cahan's “The Imported Bridegroom,” “the literary inscription of two worlds and two selves”—that is, the realms of American and immigrant interaction and their attendant public and private personae—“allows the ethnic subject to function . . . as a figure by which ideas about the meaning of culture, citizenship, and the public/private divide might be reimagined” (49) and, like the work of Dewey, who viewed his philosophical treatises “as provocations to reform and not actual blueprints” (Kosnoski 673), Yeziarska's novel is meant to encourage reflection and debate rather than outline a specific solution for the societal problems highlighted by its narrative. *Salome of the Tenements* is thus a public challenge: it addresses the issues of shifting sovereignty, civic disengagement, political otherness, and economic citizenship; it attacks the assumptions of immigrants and native-born citizens alike; it provokes thought, and it leaves the reader to form their own

conclusions – the hope being, of course, that any potential answers will be channeled into real-world solutions and become the basis of reform.

Here, at the convergence of material acquisitiveness, “economic citizenship” (Mathieu 112), “social citizenship” (Kroen 712) and emphatic American nativism, Ewen’s claim that “Americanization is a deceptive term” (15) is incredibly relevant. If, as she writes, “it implies exchanging one nationality for another” (15), by the time Lippmann wrote, to similar effect, that it is “the substitution of American for European stereotypes” (*Public Opinion* 47) it was already becoming paradigmatically obsolete as the definition of ‘American’ was changing from a nationality to an archetypal personality during his era. Even Dewey, the philosophical champion of informed democratic interaction, concedes that “democracy means . . . personality is the first and final reality” (*The Political Writings* 61-62), and although he argued that “personality is the one thing of permanent and abiding worth” because it spawns “the other notes of democracy, liberty, equality, fraternity” (62), the personality that emerged as typologically American in the early-twentieth century was one centered on economic and social concerns rather than on Dewey’s republican ideals. The emergence of this personality—epitomized as white, urban (and later suburban) and middle-class, and as spending increasing amounts of time and money purchasing material goods and engaging in leisure activities—means that the contemporary process of Americanization can no longer be described as “exchanging one nationality for another.” It is, in fact, “the initiation of people into an . . . industrial and consumer society” that Ewen describes (15). Reinforcing this reading of events is Lawrence Glickman’s observation that “though she shared his concerns about the analogous complexities of [consumers and citizens], Lippmann’s contemporary, Florence Kelley of the National Consumers League (NCL), saw consumption as a site for the exercise

of citizenship, particularly by women, who until 1920 were excluded from the franchise” (207). Many modern scholars concur, with Nan Enstad, for example, maintaining that working class women in Kelley’s era “learned daily” that “the clothes they made, laundered, or sewed were more important than they themselves were” and, more positively, that “when they borrowed from the signifying logic of the [store] display window to increase their own worth, they claimed a cultural franchise that they would otherwise lack” (751). In this respect, *Salome of the Tenements* is not revolutionary – it is firmly rooted in its era as it addresses the paradigms of fashion and consumer enfranchisement. What *is* revolutionary about the text, however, is the fact that it chooses to completely ignore the main character’s potential right to vote—granted only three years before—upon completion of the naturalization process. Revolutionary, too, is its complicated, ambivalent, and self-subverting stance on the issue of consumerism despite its proposal of that concept as a primary means of obtaining *de facto* citizenship. The text, though steeped in consumerist principles and portraying a protagonist who achieves the new immigrant dream of marrying a rich, well-connected American, is intensely skeptical of both the ideology and the practical framework of consumerist citizenship. In this regard it anticipates the current character of an argument that has been debated for nearly a century, the ongoing relevance of which can be seen in the continued interest in and critical engagement with Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld’s *Personal Influence* (1955).

Personal Influence, subtitled *The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, is a mid-twentieth century exploration of communication, mass marketing, consumerism and political choices which has become something of a landmark because it treats its “research subjects’ choices of consumer products, movies, fashions, and political candidates equivalently” (Schudson “Equivalence” 193)

and because, like Lippmann, it addresses the concepts of citizen and consumer as if the two are fundamentally and methodologically interchangeable in a modern context. Significantly, it also echoes Deweyan thought in that “its roots [are] in the early study of voting behavior and grassroots democracy” (McCormack 180) and it has at its core “the deeply held American belief in the ‘local’ as the foundation of democracy and public life” (181). It has remained enough of an ideological milestone that it continues to generate significant discussion: in 1978 Todd Gitlin delivered a “blistering critique” of the study (Schudson “Equivalence” 193) that is itself still addressed (and sometimes refuted) by scholars, and as recently as 2006 the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* dedicated an entire special issue to the original text entitled *Politics, Social Networks, and the History of Mass Communications Research: Rereading Personal Influence*. Indeed, showing its relevance specific to the themes present in *Salome of the Tenements, Personal Influence* identifies fashion trends as social phenomena (Katz & Lazarsfeld 249) “by focusing on the crucial role of peer group approval” (Glickman 209). Glickman, in an article on the study’s lasting critical impact, notes that “in comparison with propaganda and the command economy which were the dominant forces in totalitarian societies, the fact of [consumer] choice is a symbol of freedom in democracies” (208). Indeed, he writes, it is “a form of power in” (208) and “an essential part of what characterizes a free society” (207). In response to the widely held belief that treating political and advertising campaigns as “analogous processes” (206) somehow debases the ideological integrity of democracy, he also contends that the study’s

equivalences between electoral politics and quotidian consumption may seem at first glance to be flip and/or politically suspect, and critics, at least since Todd Gitlin in 1978, have been wary of this linkage. To say that politics and

consumption are related or even homologous processes, however, is not automatically to reduce the one to the other, or to demean the political. To link consumption and politics is not necessarily to lament the degradation of politics as another site of passive, therapeutic meaninglessness, as Christopher Lasch and his followers would have it. Nor is it necessarily to accept the view that all acts of consumption are potentially subversive, as some cultural studies scholars assume. (206)

Instead, as is the case in *Salome*, reconciling the two is a constant balancing act which defies tidy categorization and rejects the concrete lines inherent in the points of view Glickman mentions. Politics and consumption are sites of perpetually shifting meanings that cannot be easily compartmentalized: consumption can be a consummately political process for one individual (Schudson “Equivalence” 198-199) and an exercise in “therapeutic meaninglessness” (Glickman 206) for another, and the modern language of politics is contingent upon the formation, presentation, and, ultimately, the consumption of both verbal and nonverbal signs. The two spheres, as Yezierska makes clear, can also be confused, conflated or contradict one another in various circumstances, resulting in processes which, while retaining the ability to be combined or viewed equivalently in certain contexts, do not offer clear paths to citizenship for immigrants either separately or paired together as an all-encompassing trope. Glickman concludes that if Katz and Lazarsfeld’s “approach paid too little attention to the aftermath of consumption decisions, it offered scholars important reasons to understand consumption as a multidimensional political activity” (212). While Gitlin may have pilloried their work for “the commensurability between consumer and political choices” (Schudson “Equivalence” 202), Schudson characterizes this aspect of *Personal Influence* as “more of an enduring provocation than a fault in their study” (202).

These critical statements explain, perhaps, the study’s sustained prevalence in discussions of citizenship and consumer choice, but they can be applied to *Salome of*

the Tenements as well. Gidlow argues that “in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political practices broadly began to reflect the rise of a consumer society” (9) and debates over the intersection of consumerism and politics have become increasingly salient as western culture continues down the course charted for it by industrialization, urbanization, mass production and globalization, as is evident in *Personal Influence*’s enduring elicitation of both praise and critique since its publication in 1955. In this regard Yezierska’s novel—in which the main characters obsess over economic and consumerist issues and, as a rule, treat them as inherently political while choosing to ignore traditional party politics—resonates with modern audiences in a way that those of many of her contemporaries do not. Schudson notes that in our current culture the political nature of consumer choice is an easy point to prove: “if you have ever boycotted grapes to support the United Farm Workers union or decided to drive a hybrid car to help conserve the earth’s resources,” he argues, “if you have ever ‘bought green’ or paid extra to purchase ‘fair trade’ coffee, you know perfectly well that consumer decisions can be directly political” (“Equivalence” 198). *Salome* predates the widespread adoption of this paradigm and, if anything, argues that consumer choice is not political *enough*. Sheryl Kroen claims that “we live in a world in which it has become axiomatic to use the language of free enterprise and consumer goods to describe the rights and benefits of citizenship, and the process of democratic politics,” but she adds a caveat stating that the “conception of the consumer *as* the quintessential citizen, and free enterprise as the ideal medium for democracy, only came to prevail after the Second World War” (709). Glickman, likewise, writes that “by suggesting . . . there was a relationship between the two, [*Personal Influence*] was part of a postwar discourse that highlighted consumption as a form of citizenship” (205). Yet, as can be seen in the political philosophy of Walter

Lippmann, in his public debates with John Dewey, and in Yezierska's treatment of the subject in *Salome of the Tenements*, this conversation was underway in America decades before Katz and Lazarsfeld submitted their work for publication. Similarly, Elizabeth Cohen's claim that modern American society, which she dubs the Consumers' Republic, was built on "a new post-war ideal of the *consumer as citizen* who simultaneously fulfilled desire and civic obligation by consuming" ("Citizens and Consumers" 214) is accurate excepting—critically—her use of the word "new." Such an ideal was addressed in Jewish immigrant fiction by Abraham Cahan as early as 1896 and by Anzia Yezierska during the interwar years, so it would perhaps be more appropriate to deem it 'newly-popular.'

With these circumstances in mind, *Salome*, even as it deals with problems timely to its era, can be seen as ahead of its time. Rather than "positing the moral weakness of consuming" (Schudson "Equivalence" 202) and maligning its detrimental effect on political action, which so many critics have done (see, for example, the conclusion of Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic*, which describes "voting citizens" as "public-spirited taxpayers . . . committed to cooperation" and decries "self-interested" consumers for being "wrapped in isolated localism or destructive competition"; 409), Schudson maintains that it is "better . . . to find strategic opportunity in consuming to enlarge the points of entry to political life and to underline the political dimensions of our world with cases in point" ("Equivalence" 202-203), which is precisely the sort of thinking that Yezierska's text engages in on an exploratory level. The novel also gains additional thematic weight when put into context as part of "a 300-year long debate over the relationship between the citizen and the consumer, and the compatibility of consumption and democracy" (Kroen 711), which historian T. H. Breen traces back to European imperialism and American

colonial culture when he argues that, because “British manufactures came to symbolize dependence and repression” and “invited colonists to think radical new thoughts about empire” (299), “consumer choice was a critical element in the American Revolution” (Schudson “Equivalence” 198). In light of Kroen’s claim that charting this three-century history of American consumerism, with all of its imperial, colonial and national ramifications, “offers no easy, ideologically driven answers” to the paradigmatically amalgamative questions of the present day, *Salome of the Tenements* seems incredibly current in its ambivalence and confusion on the subject and mirrors more modern works calling into question the practicality, the desirability and, indeed, the very validity of politically-motivated consumption and consumerist politics. Frank Trentmann claims that one of the major consequences of modernity is that “consumer identities have become suffused with questions of civic participation, cultural identities, and social and global justice, as well as with a drive to acquire goods” (380), stating, in addition, that “consumption can be about managing familial and social relationships, not merely self-centered acquisitiveness” (377), both of which are categorically examined in Yezierska’s novel. He also writes that “the study of consumption has the potential to bring together the study of work, politics, family and collective identity in fresh ways” (387), and although he is not referring to the study of consumption in literature *per se*, he has inadvertently listed several major themes which recur throughout Yezierska’s texts. These works are predominately considered “valuable as social history and somewhat less important for [their] place in literature” (Kessler-Harris Foreword v), with even “Yezierska’s partisans . . . seeing her stories as fictionalized memoirs and . . . extolling her ability to document the immigrant woman’s experience” (Ebest 105), which perpetuates the misconception that her stories are worthwhile for anything other than their literary merit. Indeed,

given the author's personal biases, her penchant for hyperbole, and her tendency to refashion her own personal history to suit the requirements of the day, "the reliability of Yezierska's 'social histories' is . . . suspect" (Ebest 105) and the reading of her work as such ignores its complex dialectical critique wherein the author exposes the shortcomings inherent in both the immigrant and native-born sides of the Americanization process. In a perfect world, such a misconception would not stand. *Salome's* continuing freshness of theme, for example, and its early examination of what has become—in academic circles, at least—a near-ubiquitous discussion of political and consumer action would widen the audience familiar with Yezierska's text; it would also earn it a place in the American literary canon free of the somewhat dismissive label of 'immigrant fiction' that continues to plague her oeuvre, and which permits her works' disavowal for anything other than a sort of hyperbolized documentary worth as period pieces representing contemporary Jewish immigrant life.

CONCLUSION

“The Torch of History”:⁴⁸

Liminality, Ethnicity and Canonicity and in the Twenty-First Century

Jules Chametzky has noted that “national and ethnic identity frequently arose in the U.S. . . . as a *response* to American conditions. It was a social and psychological need for uprooted and fragmented people to be sustained by a sense of common experience, shared especially with those who spoke a *common language*” (45), and, as we have seen, in venturing outside the boundaries of shared language and culture—by pursuing a secular education, for example, or by choosing to write in English—immigrants risked rejection by their peers for betraying the sacred bonds of group association. Taking Chametzky’s observation one step further, Vincent Franklin claims that “ethnic consciousness” is a direct consequence of “nativist attacks and opposition” (7) and, because of this, A. Robert Lee asserts that “US [*sic*] ethnicity, and the literary fictions it has engendered, of necessity involves a reckoning with America’s pervasive, however often contradictory, codes of whiteness” (235) – that is to say, American ethnic identity cannot escape the long shadow of whiteness which has, as the racially and ideologically revisionist ‘majority’ relative to which minorities have historically been positioned, been the preeminent factor in its definition. Lee also notes that, due to the work of scholars such as Ronald Takaki, “majority and minority as a familiar binary has come under serious interrogation,

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along with notions of mainstream, colour [*sic*] (and with it the colour-coding [*sic*] of migrancy), and the pre-emptive consensus that the nation remains in pretty well all essential aspects ‘white’” (239), as well as reporting that “American whiteness cannot be disengaged from issues of American class formation” (249). As this research has attempted to illustrate, Jewish immigrants were at the turn of the twentieth century caught in a liminal space—both literally, within the confines of ethnic enclaves such as New York City’s Lower East Side, and figuratively—largely ignored by the “familiar binary” of majority/minority relations as well as by “hopelessly inadequate . . . human colour [*sic*] chart of black, [white][,] red, brown [and] yellow” (243-244), and their ill-defined position elucidates several fundamental flaws in traditional melting pot ideologies. Taking primacy amongst the numerous paradoxes inherent in their situation is the fact that one of the most popular contemporary American arguments against Jewish integration, a suspected dual allegiance to Zionism, communism, or anarchism (247), resulted in an openly hostile xenophobia which actively encouraged, if not necessitated such dual identification. The consequent secondary associations were, for immigrants, frequently benign, with one’s homeland, Jewish compatriots or proto-ethnic identity becoming the focus of loyalty rather than subversive, overtly revolutionary, or violent anarchist groups, though this little convinced rabid nativists of the country’s safety and security.⁴⁹ Such duality, impressed upon new immigrants by a faux-Anglo-Saxon ‘mainstream’ which extolled the inclusive, egalitarian virtues of Americanization while shunting ethnic

⁴⁹ Sara Robinson claims that “although the United States made efforts to weed out political radicals from its immigrants” during this era, its large numbers of foreign-born “could not help but include communists or anarchists hoping to find greater political freedom in America” (120). In *Blood Will Tell*, she examines the contemporary United States’ “anxiety about the liberal left,” particularly “labor agitation” and “anarchist terrorism,” and contends that “the [popular] idea of the anarchist as a foreign outsider,” “like that of the constant threat of . . . terrorism,” “held several grains of truth” (119); the balance of her discussion of political counter-culture in the west (103-130), however, demonstrates that stereotypes, overreactions and nativist rhetoric were rife, hinting that the problem lay not with the majority of immigrants, but with overweening nativism of their host country.

individuals into low-paying, subservient positions at the bottom of the United States' socioeconomic hierarchy, manifests itself in hyphenated affinities and, necessarily, results in the creation of split 'public' and 'private' selves. It also remains one of the hallmarks of American ethnic identity and a defining feature of modern multicultural and cultural pluralist paradigms.

While examining their historical and authorial contexts, this research has endeavoured to engage in an in-depth exploration of the various ways that Jewish new immigrant fiction and autobiographies address such flaws in the melting pot mythos by focusing on English-language texts written by groundbreaking authors whose work challenges so-called 'national narratives' of blind acculturation despite contemporary critics' insistence that they were "informed by the desire to prove the assimilability of eastern European Jews" (Piper 99). Because whiteness is critical to concomitant discussions of education (who can pursue it, for example, and how, in what language, and to what end it may be pursued), political efficacy (where enfranchisement, party mobilization, the prosecution of imperialism and colonialism, and the role played by transnational ties in legislating immigration and foreign policy all come into play), and hegemonic class structures (wherein issues of labor, property, monetary wealth, and consumer culture contribute to discourses of power), these authors variously engage with, and attempt to provoke reform in, all of these arenas. These reformative overtures are, of course, an effort to assert an American identity which effaces the carefully constructed—and fundamentally fictitious—edifice of a homogenous American monoculture conflating "Angle, Saxon, Jute, Scot, Irish, Welsh, Manx, Cornish, Scandinavian and Norman" and ignoring, among other things, the "subsequent European crossovers and mix" attending these groups (A. Lee 244). Such challenges remain salient to discussions of literature, history, and sociology, as

well as to popular culture, as some modern champions of ethnic identity attempt to rewrite the new immigrant paradigm by claiming that “ethnic solidarity has been an important component of [immigrants’] success,” that the archetypal contemporary figure, still male, “emerges unscathed by his encounter with American life, unimpeded in his move upward by either the American economy or urban culture,” and “triumphs because of the plasticity of his past and his ethnicity” (Ewen 14), not least because they disallow such a rosy, multiculturalist recasting of the historical events surrounding the new immigration timeline.

But the question is, where do we go from here? William Boelhower maintains that “the long[-]established practice of compartmentalizing American literature into mainstream and ethnic cannot but lead to the belief that they are separable if not separate canons” (*Semiosis* 34), but to what extent can ‘ethnic’ literature be incorporated into the ‘mainstream’ American literary canon, and would it be entirely beneficial to advocate the removal of the ‘ethnic’ qualifier and so risk the subsumation and whitewashing of—or, in a worst-case scenario, renewed marginalization as “poor, minor, ephemeral, local, [and] aesthetically inferior” (35), and suppression of—those works and authors identified as such? Do such texts’ “victory as literature [spell their] defeat as ethnic culture,” as Berndt Ostendorf has claimed (150), or should we subscribe to Boelhower’s assessment, which holds that such “extreme underestimation of its peculiar identity” (*Semiosis* 35) is an unfortunate eventuality to which the “ghettoized [dual-canon] version of ethnic literature may [yet] lead?” And, finally, to quote Lee once more, to what extent are “the fictions designated multicultural, or ethnic, genuinely to be allowed to challenge, not to say reconfigure, the usual received notions of America’s literary canon, if not, indeed, the very notion of canonicity itself? How, in consequence, is America, and American

literature, best to be defined?” (5). The answer, I think, lies in the issue of canon formation itself.

Melinda Gray observes that “as . . . [modern] multiculturalism debates have played out” in the United States

there has been persistent scrutiny of the American literary canon and the notion of canonicity itself. This attention has provided a range of challenges to an official literary canon, and in part because each challenge struggles against its own version of the official canon, there have also been descriptions of the ways in which literary canons evolve and function and the purposes they have served.⁵⁰ (91)

“Current scholarship,” she writes, “has been particularly interested in investigating the interplay of the processes through which national or cultural identities and literary canons have been formulated. Studies of ethnicity and literature, for example,”

have afforded points of entry for discussion of the constructedness of notions of national identity and canonicity. Such projects aim for revision of the ‘long[-]established practice of compartmentalizing American literature into mainstream and ethnic’ canons that William Boelhower described in 1984.⁵¹ They also encourage experimentation with more dialogical paradigms for the study of literature of the United States, and foster inquiry into the processes by which such categories are set up and the functions that they serve (or that they have served in the past). (91)

Such investigations are, I think, necessary, and they reveal the absolute centrality of ethnic and minority texts to the literature of the United States: for although it tends to exclude them or label them in such a way that they can be dismissed as “peripheral to American literary history” (94), modern American canonicity has been greatly influenced by ethnic authors as “a substantial body of writing grew from the immigration experience” of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries “and it was partly in this writing and in response to it that a national identity was fashioned”

⁵⁰ Gray directs the reader, at this point, to Wendell Harris’ “well known” (91) article, “Canonicity,” in *PMLA* 106 (1991: 110-121).

⁵¹ See Boelhower *Semiosis* 34, as above.

(91). Indeed, “the [very] urgency with which the call for a national literature was heard in this period of increasing literary production” (92) is testament to the reactionary nature of American canon formation. According to Judith Oster, “we sense in [bicultural] books that whatever demons the authors had to wrestle with, their victory was in coming to terms in some way with their own between-ness—their interlanguages, their interculture, their ‘interselves’⁵²—and in having made something out of that struggle” (68), but coming to terms with their liminality does not necessarily mean that these writers were able to forge intellectually, ideologically or politically stable, emotionally fulfilling, or socially acceptable dual-culture selves with culturally bilingual, ethnically-balanced, or ‘hyphenated’ personalities. As is evident in many of their texts, the bifurcated nature of such self-definitions, which necessitated distinct public and private selves tied to, respectively, modernity and memory, weigh heavily on the ethnic subject’s sense of identity as their past and present seem fundamentally irreconcilable. It seems that the lives of immigrant authors’ texts mirror those of their creators as “somewhere between the two poles of total assimilation and total rejection of the new culture we . . . find almost every bicultural protagonist” (Oster 193), and, I would argue, almost every object of bicultural art, so how do we go about striking a balance between ethnic literature as defined—and self-defined—by its ‘otherness’ and ‘outsider’ texts as pivotal to the definition of modern American identity, literary or otherwise, especially when

⁵² Oster defines “what language researchers call *interlanguage*” as “a stage in language learning that is no longer simply a cataloging of errors in the new language, but a language system in its own right that seems legitimate to the learners” (63), pointing, for further clarification, to H. Douglas Brown, who writes that it is “a structured set of rules which for the time being provide order to the linguistic chaos that confronts [them]” (162). Brown contends that “this is neither the system of the native language nor . . . the target language, but instead falls between the two; it is a system based upon the best attempt of the learner to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli around [them]” (163), and thus it is simultaneously a state of “‘between-ness’” (Oster 63) and an effort to create an ideolinguistic framework within which they can operate without fully comprehending the intricacies of their target language. Oster coins the term “*interculture* . . . to express the analogous [cultural] between-ness that so often accompanies and parallels language learning” (63).

“critics’ hesitation to read [immigrant and ethnic] writing as American is often mirrored in the individual works themselves, where questions of national allegiance and belonging are of central concern” (M. Gray 95)?

First of all, we must acknowledge that “complementarity does not mean co-option” (A. Lee 5). In the wake of this realization, critics of minority writing can avoid arguing for a mode of canonical inclusion that views ethnic texts as “mere token[s] [of] diversity which[,] once taken note of[,] can be safely incorporated and so disarmed.” In the words of David Palumbo-Liu, “the goal is to resist the essentializing and stratifying modes of reading ethnic literature that make it ripe for canonization and co-option” (17), which is aided by respecting individual works’—and authors’—right to avoid being considered ‘representative.’ Subsequently, we can begin building a critical framework wherein the hybrid nature of all American literature is embraced rather than downplayed. In 1920, at the height of the immigration debates which led to 1921’s Emergency Quota Act, Carol Aronovici, an ardent critic of the Americanization movement, sagely stated that “we need the music of Italy, the clear thinking of France, the industry and thoroughness of Germany, [and] the truthfulness and art of Russia” (716-717)—“we have them all in our midst,” he claims, “if we would only learn to find them, encourage them, and use them” (717)—because “literature, art, science, which is not fertilized by a constant influx of new elements free from the ritualism and homogeneity which must of necessity become increasingly a part of too intensive an adaptation, becomes either sterile or monotonous” (710). Thus “the vision of the unassimilated is frequently necessary in the opening up of new highways of thought and progress” because “their contributions toward native creative genius . . . may interpret America from new

angles[,] and with benefit to all,” while “yield[ing] new and invigorating elements in the creative work of the nation.”

Boelhower argues that “popular ethnic fiction is almost exclusively a fiction of type-scenes;⁵³ that is, it simply revives a traditional set of ethnic themes, subjects and situations” and “is mostly concerned with cultural reproduction rather than semiotic production[,] with rehearsal rather than with the rekeying of ethnic meaning according to contemporary needs” (*Semiosis* 103). “The ethnic protagonist,” therefore, “adds nothing new to the ethnic cultural system, his function being that of confirming what has already been established.” “Serious ethnic expressions [such] as the immigrant novel and autobiography,” however, are “not so socially fixed or predictable” (103, 104) because their “goal is interpretation of the past and not [the reproduction of] the past itself” (104). Authors of serious ethnic fiction, like Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska, autobiographers like Rose Cohen, and even those writers who, like Mary Antin, fall somewhere in the middle, draw from a “bound cultural encyclopaedia” comprising “a stock of themes, characters, situations, objects, customs, beliefs, [and] institutions” (105), but what separates their work from what Boelhower calls “popular ethnic fiction” (103) is their willingness—and ability—to take these generic, stock forms and imbue them with new life as part of a reinterpretation of ethnic existence in the United States. This redefinition of clichéd cultural artefacts “germinates an ethnic semiosis based on strong sign chains” (105), and in situations where “social identity is mediated by a broad context of ethnic referentiality,” the reformulation of

⁵³ In *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (1984), the author explains that “a type-scene is an instructional gestalt composed of a prefabricated script, a fixed amount of semantic data, and a specific set of role slices, actions, settings, and goals,” and claims that “its semiotic activity tends to be hypercodified, which makes the type-scene definitionally strong and socially representative of ethnic cultural practice. In fact,” he writes, “the type-scene version of an ethnic cultural system offers a complete and standard pragmatics of ethnic content and its situational structures are homologically intracultural” (99), which makes it ideal for perpetuating immigrant cultural orthodoxy and proliferating comfortingly familiar narratives.

stereotypical actions, scenes and characters amounts to nothing less than challenging the reinscription of stagnant cultural norms which stifle diversity, disavow individual creativity, and discourage self-determination. They also, critically, contribute to the art and identity of the nation, as Aronovici suggests.

In the end, the crucial question is ‘what is ethnic literature?’ Is it literature written by an ethnic author? Is it literature about ethnic characters, or featuring ethnic characters? Is it literature which addresses, in some form or fashion, ‘ethnic’ themes, or which goes about the thorny business of constructing, or, for that matter, deconstructing ethnic identity? There are as many answers to this question as there are literary critics, and the complexities attending those answers are myriad. However, we can simplify the issue—and eschew the problem of coeval ‘mainstream’ and ‘ethnic’ canons—by taking Boelhower’s advice. “Why not,” he asks, “consider the ethnic novel”—although he claims that he is “too sceptical [*sic*] to believe that such an animal really exists”—“as a novel with a difference[,] or with a play of differences” (35)? If this is done, he writes,

it can be ordered by such various narratological programs as the detective story, the pastoral novel, the utopia, the proletarian novel, and so forth, [while] what distinguishes it from mainstream samples of these literary typologies is the fact that it circulates ethnic [semiotic] signs with a greater or lesser degree of frequency and intensity. (35-36)

“The very ‘ethnicity’ of ethnic and, for that matter, mainstream fiction” would thus, he argues, become “pangeneric and transcultural” (36), allowing “one [to] . . . include in his [or her] reading list for a course on ethnic fiction”

texts [such] as Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, and Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* along with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep*, and Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. Not only does such a list show how ubiquitous the ethnic sign is in American literature but also how hopelessly American ethnic fiction is. (36)

Indeed, Boelhower contends, rather dramatically, that semiotic marks of ethnicity, and, hence, discussions of ethnic representation itself (which he calls “the ethnic sign and the empirical traces of ethnic discourse”), “are so capillary, so pervasive, so inseparable from the mainstream literary corpus that any effort to relieve American literature of its ethnic corpuscles by means of critical blood-letting could only result in its bleeding to death” (37).

Rome was not built in a day, to quote a popular aphorism, nor was the western literary canon. To expect an immediate and thorough revision of the canonical paradigm would be unrealistic, but current interrogations of the canonization process are laying invaluable groundwork upon which can be built a stronger, more diverse, and broadly inclusive literary horizon. As critics concerned with diversity, our job is to continue bridging the not inconsiderable gap between ‘ethnic’ and ‘mainstream’ writing by reclaiming, where possible, those texts which have been dismissed, dispossessed, or “disarmed” (A. Lee 5) by subsumation into the pantheon of American letters. In this endeavor, a knowledge of history is key, but, as Martha Montero-Sieburth and Mark LaCelle-Peterson have noted, “awareness of the struggles of the past will not provide a prescription for the present; at best, historical grounding can provide a foundation for working toward the future” (321).

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